The
LONE RANGER
Rides
Fran Striker

“Mask Of The Lone Ranger”
This is a work of fiction
based on the public domain book
“The Lone Ranger Rides”
by Fran Striker
with edits and arrangement
by Larry W Jones

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CHAPTER 1 – THE BASIN

In a remote basin in the western part of Texas, the Cavendish clan raised cattle. From the vast level acreage, where longhorns grew fat on lush grass, the surrounding hills looked verdant and hospitable; but this was pure deceit on Nature's part. Those hills were treacherous, and Bryant Cavendish loved them for that selfsame treachery.

Sitting on the porch of his rambling house, the bitter old man spat tobacco-flavored curses at the infirmities that restricted him. His legs, tortured by rheumatism, were propped on a bentwood chair, and seemed slim and out of proportion to his barrel-shaped torso. His eyes, like caves beneath an overhanging ledge, were more restless than usual, as he gazed across the basin. He rasped a heavy thumbnail across the bristle of his slablike jowl.

There was something in the air he couldn't explain. He felt a vague uneasiness despite the almost pastoral scene before him. He scanned the hills on all sides of the basin, knowing that no stranger could come through the tangle of underbrush and dense forest. Those hills had always been practically impassable.

Then his restless eyes fell on the weird riot of color to the north. That was Bryant's Gap. Water flowing from the basin springs had patiently, through countless ages, cut the deep cleft in solid rock. The walls towering high on each side reflected unbelievable hues. Bryant's scowl deepened as he observed the Gap.

He could see but a few yards into it, and then it turned and his view ended abruptly on a rainbow wall. That wall had often reminded Cavendish of a rattler, beautiful but dangerous.

"If it uz only straight," he growled, "I c'd see when someone comes this way. But the canyon is as fickle as a wench's disposition."

Once more his finger scraped across the two-day beard. Cavendish had survived a good many years there in the West. He had risen above the many forms of sudden death, to know an old age of comparative security. But, like men in that region, where eternal vigilance was the price of safety, his intuition was developed to a high degree. In a poker game he played his hunches. And in life he listened to that little-understood sixth sense.

"Somethin'," he decided, "is goin' on in that Gap, as sure as I'm sittin' here."

As if to echo his words, a distant rumble reached his ears. It came from the Gap. At first he thought it must be another of the frequent storms. He listened, then his face grew harder than before. His jaw set firmly.

"That ain't thunder," he muttered. "That's gunplay!"

His first impulse was to call for some of the men to investigate. Instead, he listened for a moment. His niece, Penelope, could be heard humming a gay tune inside the house. She, at least, had not heard anything unusual. Bryant knew his eyes were failing him of late, and he began to doubt his ears. Perhaps, after all, it might have been thunder. Wouldn't do to start a lot of commotion over nothing at all. Mustn't let the boys know how the old man's slipping.

He struggled to his feet and, half-supporting his weight by gripping the back of a chair, moved to the end of the porch and looked toward the south, where two of his nephews stood idly smoking near a corral. His lips moved with unuttered comments when he saw the men. Scowling, he made his painful way back to the chair.

"Must've been mistaken," he muttered.

There was no proof that Bryant Cavendish did not like his relatives. On the other hand, he never had shown affection for them. That wasn't unusual, because he never had cared particularly about anyone.

His bitter outlook on life made him feel that affection and softness went hand in hand. He had lost all respect for his two brothers when they married. The fact that Bryant had outlived them both proved to his own satisfaction, which was all that mattered, that marriage and the problems of the benedict make men die young.

One brother had left four sons, the other a daughter. Bryant, the last of his generation, had raised the brood. His domination cowed the boys, but Penelope escaped. An inherent sense of humor saved the girl. When Penny left for an Eastern school, in accordance with the written will of her foresighted father, she was without a trace of the sullen, subservient manner that marked her cousins. Bryant frowned on the idea of sending the girl to school. To him it seemed a waste of time and money, but he followed the terms of his brother's will with meticulous care.

Superlatives cannot be used in connection with the boys of the second generation of Cavendishes. So instead of stating that Mort was the most courageous, it is more accurate to record that Jeb, Vince, and Wallie were even less courageous than Mort.

It was Mort who, as a pimpled adolescent, suggested meekly that he and his brothers leave the Basin. It took three days for the flames of rage that exploded from Bryant Cavendish to die down, and their embers smoldered for weeks thereafter. It took several years for Mort to build up the spunk to assert himself again. He married Rebecca and brought her to the Basin. The hurricane blasts from Uncle Bryant made all previous Cavendish tirades seem like the babblings of brooks that inspire poets.

Bryant was an old man, and even his iron will could no longer ignore the rheumatism that made his legs almost useless. As it became increasingly necessary for the nephews to assume responsibility, his resentment toward them grew proportionately.

Cool water, piped from a mountain spring, gurgling and splashing into a trough ... a sheltered basin, blanketed with grass ... sturdy, comfortable houses ... contented cattle, growing fat ... the song of a girl ... the laughter of a child ... clumping hoofs ... lazy smoke from cowboy cigarettes.... "Yew got the makin's?"... "Ain't Mort's wife startin' t'git big again?"... "I heered a doggoned funny story las' week, it'll bust yer sides."... "Gimme the lend of a chaw, will yuh?"... "My feet're killin' me."... "I gotta git me some boots next payday."... "Thunderstorm due about t'morra."

In the Basin, normalcy.

But in Bryant's Gap, majestic in height, gorgeous in color like the rattlesnake, six men sprawled on rockstrewn ground, and buzzards circled overhead.

CHAPTER II - THE GAP

The lifeless forms that littered the floor of Bryant's Gap had but recently been men who lived a vital, hard life in the outdoors; men who could shoot fast and straight, whose every sense was tuned to a pitch that made them aware of any danger that lurked. The dead men had been Texas Rangers.

In a roundabout way, these riders had been told that men they sought as outlaws could be found in Bryant's Basin. To reach the Basin they had ridden through the Gap—almost through the Gap—but Death had cut their journey short. Killers, waiting behind protecting rocks, had fired without warning. Half of the small band had spilled from the saddle, either dead or wounded, at the first fusillade of bullets. The others, with the intuitive action of men who live and often die by the gun, had leaped to the ground to fight from behind the scant protection of fallen horses. Empty cartridge cases gave mute evidence of their gallant stand.

The Rangers all had fallen, but in one a tiny spark of life still glowed. The man, wounded in several places, looked dead. Even the buzzards, circling ever lower, experts at recognizing death, were deceived. The gaunt birds seemed to dart away in surprise when the lone survivor moved. A dazed sort of consciousness came slowly to him. At first he was aware of heat—heat from the sun overhead and the rocks surrounding him. Then the heat became a frightful burning, concentrated in his right leg and left shoulder. Blood, seeping from a gash across his forehead, blinded him.

He tried to move, but the effort made him giddy. He fell back to rest, while he fought to gather his scattered senses.

As the mists lifted from his mind he remembered sudden shots—his comrades falling—stabbing pain shooting through his left side from the shoulder down—left hand useless—a bullet in his foot—falling to the ground—oblivion. Ambush—treachery—*must* live—must bring the killers in!

Sheer courage, and the will to ignore the pains that racked his entire body, brought the wounded man to a sitting position. At the time, the thought that murderers might still be lurking close at hand did not occur to him.

His first thought was to see if any of the others needed help, but when he tried to rise he was amazed at his own weakness. He realized that he was beyond the point of helping others.

He could barely move. He wiped the blood from his eyes, but his vision was fogged. Only large objects could be discerned, and these not clearly. He tried to locate the horses, but all except his own had died or disappeared. The white stallion that he himself had ridden stood a short distance away, as if waiting for the next command of its master. He tried to give the familiar whistle, but no sound issued from his dry, bloodless lips. He called to the horse, and his own voice startled him. It was an unfamiliar voice, one that he had never heard before—almost croaking. But the stallion heard it and came obediently to the side of the sitting man.

The big horse lowered its head at a whispered command. The reins fell close to the hands of the man on the ground. He clutched for them and had to grope before he found them. Then, clinging to the bridle, he finally gained an unsteady footing. With the instinct of the hunted he sought for his means of defense. His right hand fumbled at his waist for the familiar cartridge belt and the brace of heavy guns. The belt was missing.

This discovery should have been cause for alarm, but in his desperate condition, the loss of the weapons seemed of small consequence to the Texas Ranger. He did, however, wonder vaguely where it had gone. He couldn't remember taking the belt off, but there were many details of the short battle that had escaped his recollection. He felt about his waist once more before he would believe that his weapons were not in their familiar place. Convinced then, he knew that but one hope remained—flight.

Sensing that his master was in difficulty, knowing that something unusual had taken place, the big horse stood motionless while the Ranger dragged his body to the saddle. It called for an almost superhuman effort to mount the horse. He made no attempt to sit erect. Instead he leaned far forward, fighting desperately against the constantly increasing nausea that threatened to deprive him of consciousness. He nudged the horse with one heel, and Silver trotted forward.

Direction was a thing far out of the question, and the rider made no effort to guide his horse. He clung to the saddle, fighting every moment of the time to stay alive, while the horse carried him from the scene of sudden death where buzzards circled lower, ever lower.

When he could gather the strength to speak, he whispered in a husky voice, close to the ear of the horse, "Away, Silver—away." A trail of red that continually dripped from his right boot warned the Texas Ranger that he must stop soon and try to make some sort of inventory of his condition. But he could inventory nothing. He could remember next to nothing. He could not see fifty feet ahead or behind.

He knew, however, that the wound in his right foot was the one most in need of attention. He managed to examine this without slackening his speed. The sight inside his blood-soaked boot was anything but reassuring. He rode on, sparing neither his horse nor his own condition. Spells of dizziness, recurring with increasing frequency, made him realize that he could not continue much further without stanching the flow of blood from the boot. He pulled the white horse to a halt and slid to the ground. With relief he found that his vision had improved, and he could scan the Gap behind him. There was no sign of pursuit.

He cut open the boot and found that a bullet had severed a small artery. Making a rude tourniquet, he succeeded in checking, to some extent, the spurting flow that was sapping his strength.

He bandaged the wound as best he could with dressings torn from his shirt. He tried to stand, and found that the loss of so much blood had sapped his strength to a surprising degree. He could, however, support his weight by the aid of his horse. His mind was clearer. He found himself trying to analyze the events that had led up to the massacre, while his eyes studied the Gap. Why had the Texas Rangers been sent for? If they were not wanted in Bryant's Basin, it would have been a simple matter to have ignored them as had always been done in the past. Someone had sent for the Texas Rangers. Someone had objected with bullets to their coming.

Did outlaws actually live in Bryant's Basin? If so, why were they there? Why had the Rangers been sent for? What could possibly happen in the Cavendish domain that the stern old man could not handle himself? These, and countless other questions, raced through the Ranger's brain while he continued to observe the Gap.

He noted that the sun was gone, and it was growing dark. This left him in less danger of capture, but increased the difficulty of the ride. The rocky footing was hazardous under the best of conditions. In the dark, this peril was increased tenfold.

He remounted after a struggle with weakness. At first he tried to guide the horse away from Bryant's Basin, but this seemed only to confuse the beast, so he gave up the attempt and let Silver have his head. At intervals he was compelled to steady himself like a drunken man.

A starless night fell into the Gap, and with its coming the danger of pursuit was ended. A chance encounter was all the rider had to fear, and there was little likelihood of this. For a while his mind went blank. He was roused from a sort of stupor by the sound of running water. The horse had halted, while the Texas Ranger dozed, and was drinking from a creek. A sudden uncontrollable thirst assailed the man. Once more he climbed painfully from the saddle. Slumping to the ground, he crawled toward a stream that gurgled over stones.

Cold water had never tasted sweeter. He sipped slowly, then raised his head to let the cool draft quench the burning in his throat. About to drink again, he paused and grew tense. The sound he heard might have been a night bird, but the trained ear of the Ranger detected a peculiar quality in it.

"Odd," he thought. "That sounded as if it came from a human throat."

He waited to catch the next call if it were repeated. He didn't see that Silver, too, was tense. The birdlike trill sounded again, nearer this time. The horse reacted unexpectedly to the call. Silver jerked back, and the reins slipped from the wounded man's hand. While he watched in consternation, the white horse scampered off in the direction of the sound.

Stunned by this new misfortune, the wounded man listened to the hoofbeats until they were swallowed by the night. Not until then did he try to call. His voice was barely a whisper. Desertion by Silver was the worst possible thing that could have happened. Pursuit of the horse was out of the question. The wounded man couldn't even stand alone. With such philosophy as he could muster, he turned and finished the drink that might cost him his life. Then he dashed water over his face, which had become caked with blood, sweat, and alkali dust. The wound on his forehead was a minor one, but it smarted frightfully as the water touched it.

He determined to make himself as comfortable as possible while he had the opportunity and plenty of water. He turned his attention to his other wounds. Removing his shirt, he felt gingerly of his left shoulder. His left arm had been useless to him. Now he knew why. The bullet was embedded in the flesh. He realized that this might cause considerable trouble later on, but there was little he could do there in the darkness, other than to wash the wound and bandage it clumsily. The bullet was sunk deep, probably to the bone. He rightly reasoned that some of the force had been lost by the bullet's first striking a rock, and entering his arm on a ricochet. Otherwise the bone would have been broken.

His shoulder fixed to the best of his ability, he looked at his wounded foot again. It was difficult to determine much about the wound in the darkness, but the bleeding seemed to have stopped. When he had bathed and redressed the foot, he found that he could stand. He had to support himself by clinging to a rock, and most of his weight was taken on the uninjured leg, but he was definitely stronger.

One thought remained uppermost in the Texas Ranger's mind. "Must live," he breathed, "must fight through somehow so I can tell what happened to the others. Come back with more men—learn what's going on at the Cavendish place."

If he could stay in the stream, he'd leave no trail. He started slowly, working his way along against the current, clinging to rocks when they were within reach, crawling on his stomach when his wounded leg gave out. Frequently he paused to rest, still remaining in the stream. He was soaked through, but the cold water was pleasant. It chilled the burning of his wounds and made the pain more tolerable.

The stream took him close to one wall of the canyon, the wall on his left. Against the current, his progress was painfully slow, but it was progress.

Somewhere in the darkness ahead, he heard the sound of falling water. This animated him. A falls might mean some sort of gorge, a tiny cave perhaps, in which a man might hide until his wounds were healed. By resting frequently, the wounded man kept going longer than he thought possible. At length he reached the falls.

The water dropped a scant four feet from a ledge. With his one good hand, the wounded Ranger pulled himself up on the ledge, and there his strength abandoned him. He slumped half in the stream, half out of it, and sank, completely spent, into a dense void of unconsciousness.

CHAPTER III - THE CAVE

When he awakened, the wounded Texas Ranger realized that it was well past daybreak; the sun was high in the cloudless sky and beating down on the ledge. It must have been the sun, shining directly into the man's eyes, that had roused him. When he moved he felt a new torment of pain in every fiber of his being. His wounds had stiffened. His right foot and leg, and left shoulder and arm, were utterly useless. Movement of these limbs made stabbing pains shoot the entire length of his body.

He lay quietly for some time, experimenting with the slightest movements until he had managed to turn so that he could look about him. The ledge that had served as a resting place at night was a dangerous refuge in the daytime. A discovery buoyed his hope. He saw that the water came from an opening a few yards back on the ledge. The opening was large enough for a man to enter standing up, with room to spare. Inside he would be sure of concealment and a plentiful supply of water. Unless someone actually entered the cave, he would be comparatively secure. His only considerations would be hunger, weakness, and complications that might set in from the wounds.

Food would be the problem. Even with a good horse it would take more riding than he could do in his present state to reach the nearest food. Without weapons of any sort, he could scarcely hunt, even if there were game to be found in the barren sun-baked Gap. Food therefore was out of the question. He must content himself with water until he was strong enough to travel far on foot.

He crawled painfully toward the cave and stopped just beyond the entrance. Inside, it widened out surprisingly. Torrents of water in some ages past must have churned furiously, seeking exit through the portal, to carve away the heavy stone in such a manner. The stream came from somewhere in the deep, dim recesses of the cave. Gravel and shale lined the water's edge. This hard ground would serve the Texas Ranger as a rough couch, perhaps for many days to come.

The outlook was desperate, yet the man felt that there must be some reason why his life had been spared thus far. It wasn't that he was afraid to die. At any time during the past few hours death would have been a welcome relief to the pain of living. Some voice deep within him kept telling him that he must live, must fight for life so that he might see justice done. And so he fought. None of the events seemed logical to him, yet he sensed that in some manner everything would dovetail into a finished pattern in which he himself would play a prominent part.

Every element of his life during the past day and night had been a new experience. Even the Gap and the cave were new to him. Strange, random thoughts kept intruding on his efforts to make plans for the future. Thoughts of his life in the past; the silver mine inherited from his father, but never worked because he had never wanted riches.

He was tired, despite the recent sleep. He lay back, right hand beneath his head. Perhaps he dozed; he couldn't tell afterward whether he had slept or not. His senses played such pranks that his thoughts might have been dreams or mere hallucinations. At any rate those thoughts were vivid and oddly assorted. Against the roaring background of the water in the cavern, he seemed to hear a voice. First it was the voice of a boy, an Indian boy whom the wounded man had known long years ago. He too had been a boy at that time.

The Indian was alone, a child who was the sole survivor of a furious Indian war. The son of a chief, the lad had remained, sorely wounded, at the side of his dead parents. It was there that the white boy found him, and took him as a friend. The two traveled together for some time until their trails separated. Now he heard the voice of this boy again. Against the blackness of the cavern's depths he seemed to see a re-enactment of the past, in rapidly changing kaleidoscopic scenes.

He saw himself as a hunter, riding in pursuit of bison, to feed starving white folks in a village and Indians on the plains. He saw himself riding through the hills in preference to gathering wealth as the operator of a silver mine. And then a reunion with the Indian he'd known as a boy. Together the two rode for a time, and Tonto helped the Ranger capture his white horse.

The day he joined the Texas Rangers was a vivid recollection. His pride in wearing the Ranger badge was tempered by the loss of Tonto's companionship.

Somewhere in the background of his visions there was a vague memory of a night bird's call.

He wondered at the scenes in a detached sort of way. Was this what dying was like? He'd heard that one's past went by in review as a man's soul departed. He no longer felt the wounds. The rumbling stream became a distant murmur that finally resolved itself into the call of a night bird. Odd, how the night bird's call continued to intrude. He fumbled with his right hand at the pocket of what was left of his shirt. He could feel the small square object there, and wished that he had the strength to take it out. He would have liked to read the little inscription in the book that had been his mother's gift.

Now even the last of sounds had ceased, and once more the tall man slept. His breathing was labored, and his hand upon his breast rose and fell as fingers that had been so strong and capable clutched the little black book in his pocket.

The afternoon was well advanced. The sun barely peeped over the rim of the Gap, but the last rays slanted at an acute angle beyond the mouth of the cave and brushed the shoulder of the sleeping man. He wakened in surprise. He felt himself surrounded by almost unbearable heat. His mouth was dry, his throat burning with thirst again.

He was barely able to raise one arm to brush a hand across his forehead. He found this dry and hot. He felt giddy. His mind whirled as he tried to comprehend this new condition. He must have tossed restlessly while he slept. His shirt was more ragged than ever. One pocket was ripped entirely off and the little black book that had reposed there was beside him where it must have fallen from his hand.

He felt his shoulder, wondering vaguely at the neatness of the bandage. He knew from the ugly swelling that the wound had become infected. Against the weakness there was only water and rest, and he'd already found that rest seemed only to weaken him further. His plight was critical.

Water might help. It was all that he had. He rolled over painfully and stretched his length, face down, against the stream.

It was then that he saw the shadow. No sound had reached his ears above the water's clamor, but someone had found his hideout and at that moment stood at the cavern's mouth.

His first impulse was to turn quickly. He started to reach for his guns, forgetting that they were not in their usual places. Then he remembered that he was unarmed—completely at the mercy of whoever stood behind him. For a brief instant he felt an odd prickling sensation move along his spine. He inwardly shrank from the impact of the bullet he was sure would come at any instant.

He felt that all he had to do was turn, face the man or men who had already killed his five companions, and his life too would be snuffed out. But did it matter? His life, at best, was measured in hours. Starvation, fever, and infection of an ugly wound were all potential killers. It was simply a case of which of these would deliver the *coup de grâce*.

His endurance and strength had carried him far beyond the limits of most men, but his own far limit had almost been reached. He had a revulsion to a bullet in the back, but after all it didn't matter greatly. This intruder, he thought, is a friend, not an enemy. A friend, perhaps unwittingly, who will put an end to pain.

The man at the entrance watched in silence and, as the dying man turned, saw his face, suffused with the glow of fever and etched with pain. He saw the glazed eyes that had once been so steely and deep; saw them rise slowly to meet his own dark, deep-set eyes. The wounded man looked up and met the gaze of an Indian.

His lips parted slightly; his first attempt at speech was a failure. Then he breathed the name of the friend he'd made long years ago.

"Tonto!"

The Indian nodded slowly.

"Me here," he said.

CHAPTER IV - GRAY DAWN

Penelope was thundered from sleep a little before daybreak. She stretched lazily, yawned deeply, then blinked her eyes wide open as jagged lightning flooded her bedroom with white light. She leaped from bed as thunder cracked again, and hurried to the open window. Wind whipped her brown hair and dashed cool rain against her tanned face. Her nightgown of flimsy stuff was blown tightly about her slender form.

Penny watched the storm and loved it. She hoped it would continue after daybreak, when she planned a ride—her first since returning from the East—on her favorite horse. She was radiant, vital, filled with a zest for living. She was happiest when alone in the saddle, wind and rain in her face and hair, matching her endurance against the fury of the elements.

She had often mused that perhaps her reason for loving the thunder was that it was the one thing that her Uncle Bryant could not argue with, or dictate to.

Thunder Mountain! She hadn't ridden there for years. If she could slip away from relatives this morning, she was going to seek the trail she'd known so long ago. The fact that this was forbidden territory merely added to the fun of riding there. It made her feel quite daring to defy a mandate of her uncle.

She lighted a lamp and glanced at a clock on the dresser. It was far too early for anyone to be stirring in the house, but at least she could dress and be ready for a quick breakfast.

She looked longingly at the trim riding habit she had brought back from the East. "Fancy doo-dads" Uncle Bryant had called the clothes. "No use starting the day with a row," she mused, and she dressed to conform with her stern old uncle's tastes. Plain clothes, made for good, hard wear. Her hair was brushed back tight and would remain so until she was out of Uncle Bryant's view, when it would be loosed to blow, and breathe cool, wet air.

It was still dark outside when she finished dressing and glanced at herself in the mirror. She was amused at the unattractive outfit. It would have been quite suitable, she reflected, for Mort's wife, Rebecca, to wear, if Rebecca ever rode a horse. She blew out the lamp, and sat by the window to watch the storm and wait for the sounds of people moving in other parts of the house. The rain fell steadily, with a promise to continue for quite some time.

The sound of water on the roof was pleasant to Penny, but the steady rhythm was broken by a man's voice. The voice was a blending of bass and discord, the voice of her cousin, Vince.

Vince Cavendish was the runt of the family. About one hundred pounds of concentrated ill will; a small package of frustrated manhood, who tried to make himself heard and observed by the mere power of his bellow. His jet-black, wiry hair was usually cropped short, so it bristled on his small head like stubble in a hayfield when the mowers have passed. His face when shaved was blue in cast, but it was more often unshaved and bristling. Vince was puny, with narrow shoulders and a narrower mind. As usual, he was arguing. Penny guessed from the outline of the men that it was Mort to whom Vince talked. Lightning, a moment later, proved her guess correct. The two were right beneath her window, sheltered from the rain by overhanging eaves.

Mort was the sort of man who would have liked to bear the weight of the world on shoulders unsuited to support the burden of a household. Much larger than Vince, he listened to his brother in the detached sort of way one waits for a kettle to boil. More accurately, in this case, Mort was waiting for Vince to stop boiling.

Penny was accustomed to arguments between the brothers, her cousins. "I'd give my favorite eyetooth," she thought, "to see Mort knock the runt down, but that's too much to hope for." She didn't know what the row was all about, she didn't especially care. Vince could pick a fight over the most trivial of subjects. She did, however, wonder why those two were out so early in the morning.

"Yuh gotta keep her in hand, I tell yuh," bellowed Vince.

"Might be a mare or a cow he's talking about," mused Penny, "or even a sow."

"They ain't none of us can handle her, if you can't, an' so it's up tuh you. I said all I aim tuh say on the subject, an' I'll *act* the next time that wife of yores breaks bounds, Mort!"

"Gosh!" said Penny to herself. "I was wrong on all counts; it's Mort's wife he's talking about. I wonder why Mort doesn't spank the little weasel."

Penny could think of nothing more incongruous than poor, mouselike, negative Rebecca breaking bounds, especially with so many small hands on her apron strings. Equally incongruous was the idea of Mort's being unable to handle Becky. Becky was a living example of a woman who had failed miserably to live up to the heroic name given her by romantic parents.

Yet, Vince had made flat statements, and there was Mort agreeing with them. "I'll see that she don't pull no more stunts like that last," he promised. "I was pretty sore about that, an' I let her know it. I reckon after what I said an' done she'll think a good many times before she tries tuh interfere with my affairs again."

"And *mine!*" snarled Vince. "If it was only yore affairs I wouldn't care, but when she starts mixin' intuh my affairs I won't stand fer it."

"She won't no more. She's had a lesson she won't fergit."

Penny couldn't suppress a shudder at the thought of the punishment probably inflicted upon Mort's wife. A bully who dared not defy another man, Mort was almost sadistic in the way he treated Rebecca.

"Now that that's settled," said Mort, "how soon is Rangoon due here?"

"Any time now," Vince replied.

Rangoon was one of several cowhands who had come to the Basin during Penny's absence to replace the men she had known. All the newcomers seemed to have a common surliness of manner, an unwholesome look about them, a furtiveness that Penny didn't like. She could think of no reason why her cousins should be out in the rain before daybreak to meet one of the hired hands.

She drew a chair to the window and sat down to eavesdrop without the slightest feeling of compunction. She rested her arms on the windowsill and her head on her forearms. Her stockinged feet were boyishly wide apart.

Mort and Vince grumbled in low tones about the weather while they waited for Rangoon. Presently the dark-faced cowhand appeared in the gathering dawn.

"Have any trouble?" asked Mort.

"Naw," replied Rangoon, "we didn't have no trouble, but it took time tuh git back here in the dark an' the rain."

"You might've come back last night," said Vince.

"Better this way," said Rangoon. "Everything's fixed. Six men come an' we got all six. That's that. We'll have tuh keep a close check an' see that there ain't others comin' tuh learn what's happened when them six don't return."

"If any others come," Mort stated softly, "we'll know about it an' take care of them."

Rangoon gazed steadily at Mort. "You," he said, after a pause, "better give that wife of yores a lesson."

"He's goin' tuh!" promised Vince. Then the three men moved away, and Penny saw them disappear beyond the corner of a building.

For some time she sat at the window with her thoughts. Ever since her return, she had been bothered by an unexplainable apprehension. The Basin, which had been her home for many years, had always been a happy place despite her surly uncle and her cousins. Now the air of the place was changed. Bryant's surliness had trebled. On several occasions he had spoken sharply, even to Penny—a thing he'd never done before. At times the girl felt quite unwelcome in the only home she knew.

She pulled on her boots, still wondering what the three men were talking about. Her thoughts were punctuated by a period in the form of a soft rap on her bedroom door. Soft as it was, the rap was so unexpected that it startled Penny.

Whoever had rapped had tried to do so as silently, as secretly perhaps, as possible, and Penny opened the door in the same cautious manner. Rebecca Cavendish, the wife of Mort and mother of too many children, made her appearance, stepping into the room nervously, quickly, with birdlike motions, and closing the door behind her.

Penny had always felt sorry for Rebecca. She understood the woman better than did any of the men. Becky always reminded Penny of a scarecrow in faded calico. What curves and grace Rebecca might have had were mental. Penny felt sure that her mind, in spite of years of hard treatment, had retained a womanly softness and a wistful desire for gracious living. She was a woman who, in the midst of plenty, lived like a slave; a woman whose mate turned to her only in passion, whose children looked to her only in hunger. Her eyes were jet, but dulled. They reminded Penny of the sharp eyes of an eagle, grown discouraged by long years of beating strong wings against the stronger bars of a cage. Rebecca's hair was black, without a trace of gray to complement the many wrinkles on her thin, high-cheekboned face.

Rebecca opened the door again, glanced quickly into the hall, then stepped back.

"Wasn't seen, I guess," she said.

"Is something wrong, Becky?" asked Penny.

It was the first time Becky had been in her room, and one of the few times she'd been in Uncle Bryant's big house.

"I've got tuh be special careful," whispered the woman in a husky voice. "Bryant never did get over me marryin' Mort, an' Mort'd beat me tuh within a inch of my life if he was tuh catch me here."

At a loss, Penny said, "Sit down, won't you, Becky?"

Rebecca shuffled across the floor, sat on one edge of the bed, and motioned with a clawlike hand for Penny to sit beside her.

"What I got tuh tell," she began when Penny was seated, "won't take me long. You must've seen that things around here's changed aplenty since you left fer school."

"Things have changed a lot," said Penny, "but the people have changed a lot more. There used to be a dandy lot of cowhands around here, but they're all gone. I don't like the looks of the new men."

Becky nodded quickly. "Just so," she said. "That's why I'm here. I've come to tell you to clear out."

"Clear out!" echoed Penny. "You mean leave the Basin?"

"That's just what I mean. It don't matter how you get out, just get. An' the sooner the better. There's things goin' on around here that ain't healthy. Things you'll be happier an' better fer not knowin' about. Now don't ask no questions, just *git*!"

Penny at first thought that torment and torture had addled the poor brain of her visitor. There was a burning sincerity in Becky's eyes.

"Now take it easy, Becky," she said softly. "I'm sure things aren't that bad." Penny felt she wasn't convincing, but her main purpose was to calm and reassure the nervous woman. "Uncle Bryant wouldn't tolerate anything that wasn't right. You know that as well as I do."

"Bryant don't know the goin's-on around here these days. He don't even know who's workin' here no more."

Penny laughed softly despite a feeling of misgiving.

"That's silly," she said. "There isn't a thing that goes on in the Basin that Uncle Bryant doesn't know about." She recalled the talk of a few minutes ago,

when the men were beneath her window, and wondered if her statement was accurate. "Tell me some more, Becky."

Anger rose in Becky's eyes. "Don't believe me, eh?" She rose to her feet. "Yuh don't believe me because the shack where I live is away t'other side of the corral, an' yuh can't hear the sounds when Mort takes me in hand. Yuh didn't hear it t'other night. Oh, I ain't sayin' it's[30] somethin' new fer him tuh raise a hand tuh me; he's done it till it's commonplace, but never like t'other night!"

Unexpectedly, Rebecca clawed at the shoulder of her flimsy dress and ripped it away from her bare, bony arm.

"Look!" she cried.

Livid lines glowed angrily across the arm, the shoulder, and as much of the woman's back as Penny could see. The skin in several places had been broken and was beginning to heal.

"Mort, the skunk, done that with a lash," Rebecca said. "You know why?"

Penny, speechless at the exhibition, shook her head. Rebecca brushed a vagrant lock of hair off her damp forehead.

"I'll tell yuh why," she went on. "It's because I didn't stay in the house one evenin' after dark. The night was hot an' stuffy an' I wanted a breath o' fresh air. I sat by the cottonwoods, south of our house. I didn't mean tuh follow Mort there an' listen tuh what him an' Vince was sayin'. I didn't even know them two was there. I couldn't help hearin' some of what—" Becky broke off sharply as if she had already said more than she intended to. Quickly she continued, "I—I mean, I didn't hear nothin' much." Penny knew the woman lied. Such intensity could never have risen from hearing "nothin' much."

"Mort an' Vince catched me there," the woman said. "Mort sent me tuh the house while he talked some more with Vince. Then Vince rid away an' was gone fer a couple of days. When Mort come in he beat me worse'n I ever been beat before. He told me if I let on that I knowed what was talked about, he'd kill me! He would, too!"

"Sit down again, Becky," said Penny as quietly as she could.

"Ain't goin' tuh," replied the woman as she pulled her torn dress back in place with fumbling fingers. "You allus been kind tuh me an' that's why I snuck in here tuh warn yuh. Yuh c'n take my warnin' an' clear out while they's the chance, or yuh c'n say I'm an addle-headed fool an' stay here!" She moved toward the door. "I'm tellin' yuh though, if yuh stay till Bryant's dead you'll be willin' tuh die!"

"Wait, Becky."

"I cain't. It's too risky. If Mort knowed I was here he'd kill me, an' I ain't usin' the word 'kill' as a figger o' speech."

"But Mort is your husband," said Penelope. She hoped to continue the conversation and learn more of what was said in the cottonwoods. "I thought you loved Mort."

"Love him?" spat the woman. "I hate the dirty cur more'n a hoss hates snakes. That's why I go on livin' here. It'd make him happy to see me clear out, but I ain't goin' tuh do it. I'll outlive Bryant, an' I'll outlive Mort, an' then my young 'uns will come intuh their share of this ranch. I'll make him pay fer the way he's treated me an' his own young 'uns."

"Tell me," said Penny softly, "what were Vince and Mort talking about, the other night in the cottonwoods?"

"About Bryant's eyes an' how easy it was tuh—" Becky broke off sharply. She gazed at Penny for a moment. Her voice grew harder, more firm. "I didn't hear," she said.

A sudden draft blew through the room. Penny saw the billowing window shades, then saw Rebecca with mortal terror in her face. Penny followed her stare. Mort Cavendish stood in the doorway. Thunder boomed outside the window.

Mort's face was expressionless. For fully a minute no one spoke to break the tableau. Becky assumed a look of defiance and waited for Mort to be the first to speak. When he did so, his voice was toneless, and quite soft.

"It's about time for you to be gettin' breakfast for the kids," he told Rebecca. To Penny he said, "Uncle Bryant is at the table; are you coming?"

Penny nodded.

Mort stood aside so his wife could pass. She moved down the hall without a backward glance.

Mort said, "I'll see you later, Becky," and Penny caught the threat that the words implied.

CHAPTER V – TONTO

The men were at the breakfast table when Penny entered the big dining room. She returned their abbreviated greetings and then took her seat to surround herself with the same wall of silence that seemed to confine everyone at every meal. The cousins, her uncle, and Penny had no common denominator of conversation. Though the food was good and well prepared, it all seemed flat and tasteless in the strained atmosphere of the Cavendish house. Nothing was said of Vince's absence for the past few days. It was taken for granted that Mort would eat well with the others, while his wife ate otherwise with her brood. Penny was relieved when the meal was finished and she could leave the house. She avoided the swelling puddles between the house and the corral. It was easy to find her own mustang, Las Vegas. The small, strong beast advanced to meet her.

A man came from the saddle shed carrying her saddle and bridle on his arm. "Sawtell," she remembered. Another of the new employees. Sawtell was easier to look at than Rangoon, but he wore an expression on his bland face that made one feel that he was sneering constantly. "Saw yuh in the ridin' outfit," he said, "so I brought your leather." "Thanks," said Penny shortly. Sawtell seemed inclined to talk while he cinched up Las Vegas. "Not much of a day for ridin'. Looks like it'll clear up by noon, though. Might be better for you to wait."

"I like to ride in the rain," said Penny. Her face lighted as a thought possessed her. "Have you ever ridden up the side of Thunder Mountain?" she asked.

Sawtell looked at her quickly. After a pause, he said, "Why?"

"When I was younger, they used to tell me that no one could ride through the tangle of weeds and things on that mountain." Sawtell nodded with a trace of a squint in his eyes.

"But," continued Penny, "I went there anyway, and I found a trail that could be followed right up to the peak. I wonder if that trail is still there." Sawtell shook his head slowly. "I know about that trail," he said, "but it's all overgrown now and you'd break the leg of a horse you tried to ride up there." Penny couldn't conceal her disappointment. She mounted gracefully and swung Las Vegas away from the group of buildings. Most of Penny's enthusiasm for her ride was dissolved by the statement that the old trail up Thunder Mountain was gone. She gazed wistfully at the huge tangle of green things that rose to such majestic heights. "Darn it, Las Vegas," she complained to the mustang, "everything's changed here."

She looked back toward the house and noticed that in riding without a definite direction she had unconsciously followed the route of her explorations of another day. She had placed the saddle shed between her and the house so that Uncle Bryant, if watching, would not see where she went. She pulled off her hat and drew the pins from her hair. It fell in soft waves, which were rapidly becoming wet, to her shoulders. Thunder rumbled somewhere overhead and rain beat her cheeks. She seemed to feel an uplifting as the wind swept her hair straight out. She thrilled to the stinging rain like an old salt returning to the spray of the sea.

She slapped Las Vegas on the rump. "Come on!" she cried. Las Vegas dropped his ears and went. The horse stopped at the foot of Thunder Mountain where the tall brush and dense trees blocked the way. He turned his head as if to question Penny: "Right or left, which will it be?" This was the spot where the old trail had once begun. Penny glanced back toward the distant ranch house and the buildings that surrounded it. Sawtell had said the trail was now impassable. Penny was in the mood that Uncle Bryant had once termed "cussed contrariness."

"Well, what're we waiting for?" she called to Las Vegas. "Are you scared of a few shrubs?" She heeled the mustang, at the same time whacking her hat against his flank. "*Giddup!*" The mustang lunged into the tangle. Thorns tore at his fetlocks and raked his sides. Penny was nearly swept from the saddle by a low branch. Brush slapped and scratched her. Only a streak of Cavendish stubbornness, and the fact that it was almost impossible to turn, kept her going. Las Vegas seemed determined to make the girl regret her decision as he plunged ahead. Then, surprisingly, the trail ahead was clear. Without warning the path widened where the brush had been carefully cut back. The route went around treacherous holes and rocks that were too large to move. Lopped-off branches tossed to one side showed that the trail was man-made,

not accidental. This puzzled her. Sawtell had told the truth about the first hundred yards, but he had been mistaken about the part of the path the girl now rode. Interwoven branches of trees overhead blocked out a great deal of the rain. There was just a gentle dripping that would probably continue long after the rain had actually stopped.

Penny took her watch from the small waterproof envelope that was pinned to her shirt. She thought she might have time to ride all the way to the top of Thunder Mountain if the path remained as clean as it was at present. Now that she no longer had to concentrate on staying in the saddle, her thoughts went back to the scene in her room when Becky had called. If it hadn't been for the peculiar meeting between Mort, Vince, and Rangoon, she might have thought less of Becky's warning. All things considered, however, she felt certain that there was something definitely wrong in Bryant's Basin. What was it that Becky had started to say about her uncle's eyes? What had she overheard in the clump of cottonwoods? Penny had no intention of following Rebecca's advice. She was quite determined to stay in the Basin and see what happened next. Bryant's eyes—what about them? Perhaps she could persuade Rebecca to say more when she saw her later in the day. She'd call on her in the humble shack and have a talk. Perhaps if she were there when Mort came in after his day's work Rebecca would be spared some of her husband's violence.

Penny's thoughts were broken when she had to rein up suddenly. The trail ahead was blocked by the most magnificent horse that the girl had ever seen. Pure white, with muscles that rippled in a way that made his coat gleam like sparkling silver, he stood there and looked at her. Penny dismounted, holding the reins of her horse while she advanced toward the white beast. "Gosh!" she breathed in admiration. "What a horse! Here, fellow!" She held a hand before her, but the white horse stood motionless. The girl moved one step nearer, and the white horse backed slowly.

"Don't be afraid of me," the girl said, "I want to be friends."

"Silver not make-um friends." Penny swung, startled, toward the thick, guttural voice. Then she saw the Indian. He was tall, fully six feet, without the advantage of heels. He was clad in buckskin and moccasins. His face was broad and characteristically high-cheekboned. Hair was drawn straight back from a part in the middle and done in a war knot low on the back of his head. Heavy revolvers, of the most modern make, swung from his waist, were a somewhat incongruous touch. A bow and arrows would have been more in keeping with the rest of the Indian's equipment. The Indian was a striking-looking man. His face showed interest in the girl; intellect was indicated in his forehead. In his deep, dark eyes, instead of hostility there was a warm friendliness.

"I—I was admiring your horse," the girl stammered.

"That not my horse. My horse yonder." Penny looked beyond the white horse, where the Indian pointed, and for the first time noticed that the trail had widened to a clearing fully thirty yards across. The open space was bordered by huge trees, and just beyond one of the largest of these she saw a paint horse.

"My horse there," the red man said. "This horse not mine. This horse name 'Silver.'"

"Silver," repeated the girl. "It certainly suits him." She thought her uncle would delight in owning such a beast.

"Is—is Silver for sale?" she asked.

The Indian's face showed a faint trace of a smile, as he shook his head slowly. There was a somewhat awkward period of silence. The Indian stood as if waiting for Penny to make the next move. She had a fleeting thought that she should have been afraid. She knew that she was far from anyone who might help her. Yet she felt quite at ease. The Indian had been friendly so far, respectful too, and there was something magnetic about his personality.

"Me Tonto," the Indian finally said.

"Tonto—is that your name?" The man nodded.

"Do you live here?"

"No'm," replied Tonto, "me stop-um here short time. Maybe leave soon."

Then Penny saw the crude lean-to fashioned from spreading branches of pine. Inside there was considerable duffle, packed for quick loading on a horse. "Do you mind," said Penny with an impulsiveness that later surprised her when she thought of it, "if I sit in your lean-to and get out of the rain for a few minutes?" Tonto looked a bit surprised, then glad that he was so trusted by the girl. He seemed to be bending every effort to put her at ease.

When she stepped on the soft boughs of evergreen that carpeted the lean-to, the Indian removed his belt and the heavy revolvers and tossed them on the floor close to her. "Me not need guns now," he muttered. Penny understood, and appreciated the red man's gesture. He was putting his only weapons where she could reach them if she cared to. He remained just outside the roof of the small shelter, ignoring the drizzle as he sat on the trunk of a fallen tree.

"I'm from the Basin," the girl explained. "I used to come up this trail a lot, but it was always pretty hard riding. It's been cleared since the last time I used it."

The Indian nodded. "That plenty strange," he muttered.

Penny looked at him sharply. "Strange? Why?" Tonto didn't reply. He seemed deeply preoccupied. "Do any of the men from the Basin ride this way?" asked Penny after a pause.

Tonto didn't reply.

"Who owns the white horse?" There was another pause; then Tonto said, "My friend." The way he said it was peculiarly impressive. Penny wondered if the friend were another Indian or a white man. She said, "Does your friend live in the Basin?" Once more the Indian gave a negative shake of his head.

"Where is he now?"

"Him plenty sick. Tonto come here, look for feller to ride by. Get food for friend."

Penny could be very adroit at questioning when she chose. She talked with the big Indian at length and learned that his friend was close to death. She further learned that men from Bryant's Basin had been known to travel on the Thunder Mountain trail.

This surprised her. Tonto needed certain kinds of food for his friend, food which couldn't be shot or caught with hook and line, and he was waiting to take what he needed from the first men who rode through the clearing. As Penny listened to what Tonto said, she felt herself becoming keenly interested in his needs. She tried to determine which of the Basin men had used the Thunder Mountain trail, but Tonto couldn't describe them. He knew only what he'd read in the hoofmarks on the ground.

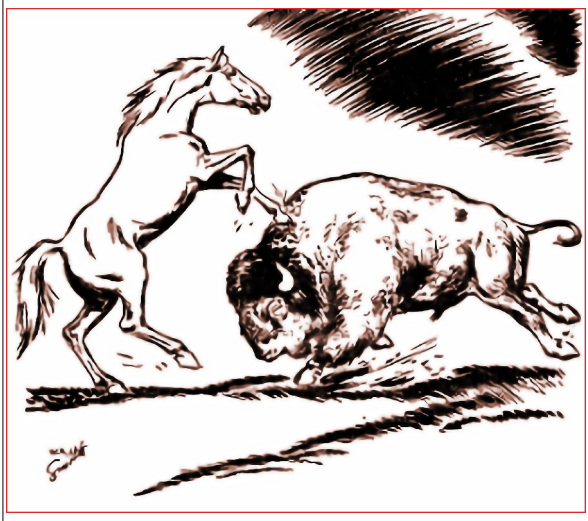
It was a day of surprises, and most of all Penny was surprised at herself. Before she realized what she had done, she had promised to ride back to the Basin and secure the things that Tonto needed. The look of gratitude that showed in the Indian's face was a thing to behold. It was radiant and said "thanks" more effectively than any spoken words.

Then Penny mounted Las Vegas and started her return.

"I must be a darn fool," she told Las Vegas. "I don't know what possessed me to make me promise to take food to that Indian. If Uncle Bryant knew about it, he'd be frantic. He mustn't know."

She rode in silence for a time. She tried to tell herself that she was working in the interests of her uncle in taking food back to the clearing. Further talk with Tonto might bring out more facts concerning men from the Basin who rode on Thunder Mountain secretly. Yet, in her heart, the girl knew this wasn't the real reason for helping the Indian named Tonto. It was something far more subtle; something she couldn't name; something that moved her when she heard Tonto say, "My friend."

CHAPTER VI - SILVER



After Penny left the clearing, Tonto stepped to the side of the big white horse. He stroked the silken sheen of the stallion's nose and said, "Soon girl come back with plenty food. Then we go to white friend."

A rare bond of friendship existed between the wounded Texas Ranger in the cave, the Indian named Tonto, and the mighty stallion, Silver. Tonto and Silver were of royal blood. Tonto was the son of a chief; Silver, a former ruler. But these were honors of the past. Destiny had even greater things ahead for the white man.

Tonto lost his chance to reign when his tribe was wiped out in his boyhood. Silver had abdicated. The stallion's background is a story in itself: Wild Horse Valley, nestled in the heart of green hills, was a sanctuary where men had never been. The grass was green and lush; great trees spread leafy boughs to cast soft shade. Here, from the living rock, came waterfalls that were sweet and pure. King Sylvan and his gentle mate, Moussa, ruled this land. Their court was made up of untamed horses. Horses that had never known restraining bit or binding saddlestrap. Happy, carefree horses they were, that had never seen men nor known men's inventions. Sylvan had won the right to rule his followers by might and courage. He was the fleetest of foot, the quickest of eye, the greatest of strength. Sylvan, the King!

Then Moussa bore the king a son—a prince—and Sylvan's happiness was complete. His fleet hoofs pounded the turf, racing, turning, flashing a white coat in the bright sun. He hoped his little son would see his strength, his speed, and emulate them. Less than two hours after his birth, the prince was

trying his slim, straight legs. In the months that followed, the white colt developed the strength and fearlessness of Sylvan. Added to these were the gentleness, grace, and beauty of Moussa. For many weeks the prince of Wild Horse Valley stayed close to his mother's side, and his little shadow merged with hers as the two moved through the valley, guided by Sylvan, who knew where water was sweetest and grass most tender. Then came the days when colthood was left behind, and the son could outrun Moussa and keep pace with mighty Sylvan. Like the wind, the white one and Sylvan raced side by side. How the sun flashed from their sleek bodies as they raced, cut back, reared, and whirled in sheer joy! Life was good. Life was sweet. And Moussa watched with pride.

Tragedy came into the prince's life when Moussa went to the everlasting happiness of other green pastures. By this time the prince was fully grown and the equal in strength of his father. Day after day, the prince met and defeated new challengers in the field of combat. While Sylvan remained king, the prince fought to hold his own exalted position. The battles were furious. No quarter was asked, none given. The white prince never paused in the fray until his opponent lay conquered at his feet. Finally, when the last challenger was beaten, the prince called out in his victory. Sylvan responded with mighty pride. A king and his son, both conquerors and champions. Stronger, greater, than any other in their herd. Acknowledged by all as the ones who should lead while others followed.

Then, one day, at the narrow entrance to the valley, strange creatures waited with cruel weapons; creatures new to the horses. Men who came with tragedy and pain. These were intruders who were looked upon as enemies to be driven away. The king sounded the attack, and led the charge. Fire, like lightning, flashed before the horses. Thunder roared deafeningly close at hand. The fury of those hammering hoofs could not long be withstood, and the men retreated—then rode away to save their lives. The prince raised his strong voice in shrill exultation, but his cry was short. The king was on the ground beside him. Mighty Sylvan was dead.

Burning hatred for men grew in Silver's heart while he gently nuzzled his father's prostrate form. There was little left for the prince in that valley. Nothing to conquer or to love. For some time he stood motionless, looking at the soft grass, the trees, the valley that had been his home. Then he turned to leave the valley.

Alone, the white horse made his way through the mountains. Hour after hour he held a steady lope that carried him ever further from the place where he had known happiness and joy, then tragedy and sudden death. The white stallion wanted to travel far, far from the place where he had seen those hated men who had killed his father. The mountains gave way to level plains.

Here was a new world! Level land, as far as he could see. He raced across it, ignoring the danger of gopher holes and rocks. Then, suddenly, quite out of wind, he stopped. Ahead of the prince there was a challenger. Not another horse, and not a man. A dirty beast, of muddy color, with a tangled mane and a huge hump on its back. A buffalo. The prince saw tiny blood-red eyes that seemed filled with evil and hatred. As if in anger at intrusion of its domain, the huge beast stamped and pawed the ground. From the monster there came a horrible bellow, and then the muddy fury charged. With all the agility the white one could command in his exhaustion, he stepped aside to dodge the charge. Here was a new kind of battle! As the buffalo raced past him, the prince felt the rough fur brush his body, and a foul odor assailed his nostrils. Mad with fury, screaming with rage, the buffalo turned and charged again. Again the white horse sidestepped. Time after time, the game was played, but it could not last forever. Soon the two must come to grips, and this would be a battle to the death.

Great bellows filled the air. Mountains of dust rose from beneath the churning hoofs as the battle began in earnest. The buffalo drew blood from the horse's side. The prince reared high, and struck down, with all his strength. The power of the huge horse's hoofs seemed ineffectual against the hairy beast. The massive head was a battering ram, driving relentlessly into the white body of the prince. Trembling and weak, the white one grew unsteady, but his gallant heart knew no defeat. He fought on, desperately and hopelessly, against the greater strength of his opponent. Utter exhaustion robbed the brave horse of the power to stand. He slumped to the ground, legs useless.

The king of horses raised his head to meet the death that was at hand. Evil, hate-filled eyes glowed redder than before as the buffalo drew back, head lowered for the final rush. The buffalo charged—then seemed to halt in mid-air—and crumpled to the ground. The white one didn't understand at first. And then the echo of a gun—the same sort of sound he'd heard when Sylvan had been struck down! It was later that the white horse opened his eyes, which were bright with pain. He knew then that man was not always an enemy. Gentle hands caressed him, and he felt cool water on his wounds. His strength, some of it, was returning, and the proud head came up once more. He remembered Sylvan. Here were hated men again, two of them. The tired body rose from the ground on trembling, weakened legs. For a moment Silver stood there, then he turned and fled.

He ran for a time, but slower with each passing moment. For some reason, the prince felt that he had left a friend behind him. He had learned a grim lesson in the wilderness outside of Wild Horse Valley. There were creatures there far stronger than any horse had been. Huge, shaggy, ugly brutes who could kill him. Beasts that fell only before the weapons of man. The horse slowed, then stopped and looked back. He seemed to know that in this new world outside the Valley he needed friends with another strength than his.

He recalled the gentle touch and the deep, kindly voice of the man who had bathed his wounds. He took a few steps toward the recent scene of battle where the two men stood, still watching him. The terrible weapon that had killed the buffalo was quiet now. Some strong force drew Silver nearer. He was tense, ready to turn and flee forever from creatures in the form of men if the thundering machine of Death was fired again, but there was only silence. The touch of the man's hand was so like the soft caress of Moussa—Silver wanted more of it. The voice of the man was good to hear. It was rich, friendly. Silver went still closer, still tense, ready to bolt. And then he was at the side of the tall man who had saved his life. He touched his sensitive nostrils to the brown hand and a new emotion was born in the heart of the horse. A love of beast for man.

The Texan found it hard to restrain his excitement. "The finest horse I've ever seen," he told the Indian beside him. "Look at him, Tonto! These muscles, and the eyes! The tail and mane are like silk! Look at his coat, how it glistens in the sun. I'm going to ride this horse. He came back after he'd left us. I'm going to ride him. And his name shall be Silver." The horse stood quietly while the tall man with the deep voice and gentle touch mounted his bare back.

"You, Silver—" the man said, "—we're going to be friends, aren't we, old boy?" A gentle caress on the white neck. To show his happiness and demonstrate the fact that he was strong again, the white horse rose high on his hind legs, then came down without a jar. He would prove to this white man who had defended him that he was glad to have a friend.

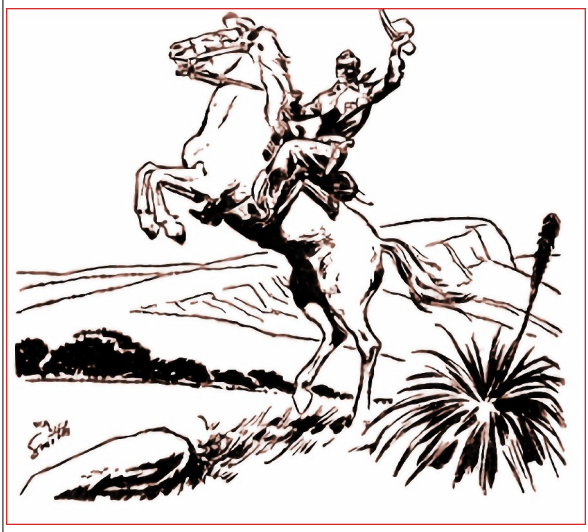
"*High, Silver!*" the man cried out. "*High up* again!" Trying to understand what the man on his back wanted, Silver repeated his rearing action. He heard the happy laugh of his rider.

"Now, big fellow," the man called out, "let's travel. *Away* there, Silver." For a moment the white horse couldn't comprehend. Then he felt a nudge from the heels of the man on his back. "Hi there you, Silver horse, *away*!" Silver moved ahead, carrying his master. He was desperately anxious to do what this man wanted. Eager to show his happiness at the finding of a friend. As he moved, he heard shouts of encouragement. "That's it, Silver! Hi you, Silver, away!" The horse moved faster. Another shout, this time contracted.

"Hi-Yo' Silver, Away!"

Silver broke into a run. Now he knew what the master wanted. At the next shout, the big stallion gave all his strength in a burst of speed that made his snowy figure like a flash of light across the open plains. The shout was one that later rang throughout the West—the clarion call—the tocsin of a mystery rider who wore a mask. "Hi-Yo Silver, *Away-y-y-y*."

CHAPTER VII – YUMA



It was midafternoon before Penelope returned to the clearing in the woods. She had found some difficulty in slipping unobserved into the storeroom on the ranch to secure the things that now reposed in saddlebags.

While in the Basin the girl had made sure that Mort Cavendish would be occupied with the supervision of branding a lot of new cattle. He could hardly get back home before dark. This would give Penny ample time to make her call on Becky and be with her when Mort came in.

When Penny turned the supplies over to Tonto, she saw the gratitude in the Indian's eyes. "It was almost as if the food were going to save his life," she later thought. The truth of the matter was that the food was to save a life that was more important to the Indian than his own could possibly be.

While in the clearing Penny tried to learn more about the trail, but Tonto either would not or could not inform her regarding its origin. She tried again to make friends with the horse called "Silver," but her overtures were rejected. Silver remained aloof. Las Vegas stood by, and Penny had the impression that he was laughing at her rebuff by Silver in whatever way a mustang had of laughing. It irked her.

"I'll come back," she said to Silver, "and bring some sugar and oats that'll make you beg to be friends."

She mounted Las Vegas and rode away, little realizing the grim sequence of events that was to be started simply because she decided to take sugar to a stallion, or the appalling episode that portended in the Basin.

Penny reached the Basin and rode directly to the ranch house. As she rounded the corner and came into view of the porch, she saw, first of all, big, stockinged feet resting on the railing, then long legs, and then the sleepy-looking face of Cousin Jeb.

Jeb was looked upon by everyone as worthless. Details of work about the ranch were mysteries he'd never tried to fathom, and he helped best by keeping out of people's way. While Penny had no respect for Jeb, she disliked him far less than she did her other cousins, Jeb's three brothers.

She had thought several times that Jeb was not nearly so simple as he was thought to be. He had a lot of idle time and he spent it all in thinking. Sometimes the results of his periods of concentration were surprisingly astute.

The girl dismounted near the steps and slapped Las Vegas in the proper place. "Get going," she said, her respect for the mustang lessened after seeing the silver stallion. Las Vegas scampered toward the corral while Penny mounted the porch and perched on the railing.

"What's new, Jeb?" she greeted her cousin.

Jeb looked at the girl with eyes that were watery and weak. "Nothin' much, I guess," he replied without breaking the rhythm of his long-jawed chewing of a match.

He stared off at the distant Gap. "Got some more thinkin' tuh do before I come tuh any conclusions. So far, I'd say they hain't nothin' much that's new."

He let his tilted-back chair drop to its normal four-legged position. He slipped his feet into heavy lace-up shoes that had no laces, and pushed himself by the arms of the chair to his feet. Standing erect, Jeb Cavendish would have been uncommonly tall. Even in his slouching posture he was well over six feet two inches. His growin' all went one way, he explained from time to time, and it was true. The same poundage would have made a normal man of five feet eight. Jeb was that lean.

"Lot o' thinkin' tuh git done," he repeated musingly, as he pushed his tapering hands deep into the pockets of faded dungarees that ended halfway between his knees and shoe-tops. Penny waited, knowing that Jeb would have more to say if given sufficient time. Jeb spat through teeth that were large and horsy. Then he took off a battered hat that was ventilated with several holes, and scratched the naked part of his head that was constantly widening with the ebbing of his thin, sandy-colored hair.

"Yuh know, Penelope," he said at length, "it's writ' in Scripture that the Lord tempers the wind tuh the shorn lamb."

So Jeb was in one of the Scripture-quoting moods.

"What about it?" asked Penny. "I've heard of that, and I've always thought that if the lamb hadn't been shorn, the wind wouldn't have had to be tempered."

Jeb looked at the girl reprovingly and went on. "Mebbe, reasonin' along them same lines, it's the Lord's will tuh blind Uncle Bryant so's he can't see what goes on around here."

"Meaning what?" asked Penny quickly.

"Meanin' it'd save Bryant a powerful lot of mental sufferin' an' bloody sweat if he didn't see too much."

Penny rose and faced her cousin directly. "Jeb," she said, "is it true that Uncle Bryant's eyes are going back on him?"

"Dunno."

"But you think they are?"

"Bryant's never complained about his sight."

"Why do you think he's losing it?"

Jeb answered with another question. "Have yuh seen him readin' of late?"

Penny hadn't and she said so. "But he never did spend much time reading, so you can't tell anything by that."

"Yuh seen the defyin' sort o' men that's come tuh work here?"

Penny nodded. "I don't like their looks at all."

"Jest so. Neither would Bryant. He's left the hirin' of new hands tuh Mort an' Vince. If he'd seen Rangoon, an' Sawtell, an' some o' the rest, he'd shoot 'em on general principles in the same way a man'd step on a pizon-bad, murder-spider. Those men've been here; Bryant's had chances tuh see 'em an' done nothin'." Having delivered himself of this, Jeb resumed his chair and slipped his feet out of the shoes again. "Take's more thinkin'," he finished, letting his eyes return to far-off places.

Penny gripped her cousin's arm. "Look here, Jeb," she said, "I want to know more about things in the Basin. Everyone has been so darned quiet, and so strained-acting, that it almost seems as if the place is filled with ... with ghosts or something. What's it all about?"

Jeb fixed his pale eyes on the girl. They seemed to cover themselves with a veil. He leaned forward and spoke in a soft confidential voice.

"Cousin, t'others around here think I'm tetched in the head. None of 'em listens tuh me but you. They don't figger me worth listenin' to, but I ain't sleepin'. I see things, I think things out. I dunno what it is, I can't put my finger on't, but they's ugly happenin's in this here Basin. They'll be some killin' here."

Jeb's voice took on a quality that chilled Penelope more than the rain that had but recently stopped falling. There was something almost sepulchral about the way he spoke. He seemed to be foretelling events with an authority that could not be doubted.

"Things can't boil underneath without breakin' out soon. Murder is comin' an' that won't be all. And I'll tell yuh some more." His voice fell to a hoarse whisper. "Uncle Bryant is gettin' ready tuh die."

Penelope broke in. "But that's—"

Jeb stopped the girl. "It's true. Don't ask fer no more. Bryant is makin' ready. I know it, he's makin' ready tuh die."

Penny knew that she'd gain nothing by pressing Jeb for further information at that time. She also knew that it was time for her to go to Rebecca. She crossed the porch and entered the house, to find another cousin sprawling in the living room. The mere fact that Wallie was there in his overdressed glory was substantial evidence that Bryant was not around. Bryant hated Wallie chiefly for his clothes, secondarily for his indolent love of social life and the girls in the nearest town. Wallie was experimenting with a guitar, doubtless practicing some new tune to play in his part of Don Juan. His shirt and the tightly wound neckerchief on his fat neck were of the finest silk and of brilliant hue. His trousers were of high-priced fawnskin, and his boots, as usual, gleamed like mirrors. He had practiced long to strum the strings of his guitar in the manner that would best bring out the sparkle of the imitation diamond on one of ten fat fingers.

He wore two guns, but wouldn't have had the nerve to use them. The guns were hypocrisy, the ring an imitation. The two were symbolic of the man who wore them—an "imitation," and a hypocrite.

Penny walked past without speaking, and entered the kitchen where old Gimlet was cooking supper. His one good eye, set in a round and wrinkled face, was like the currant in a hot cross bun. The one eye that gave the man his nickname was sharp and penetrating, but now it lighted with pleasure at the sight of the girl.

"Keee-ripes," exclaimed Gimlet, "I'm glad tuh see yuh back, Miss Penny. I shore worry when yuh ain't around."

Penny smiled. "I just wanted to tell you that I won't be here for supper. I'm going over to Becky's place."

Gimlet frowned. "If I'd o' knowed that I'd o' taken a lot less trouble in fixin' good eatin' steaks."

The girl exchanged a few more words with the cook, then left by the rear door. At the corral, which lay between her home and Rebecca's, she saw Yuma working on Las Vegas.

Yuma was the only new employee in the Basin that Penny could look at without an instinctive feeling of revulsion. Yuma was working a brush vigorously over the hide of the mustang when Penny approached. She had heard a few rumors about the big, pleasant-faced cowpuncher, with shoulders so big and broad that they seemed to droop of their own weight.

It had been said by expert judges of good fighters that a blow from Yuma's fist would drop a bull. He had once been locked in the back room of a saloon with four men in what was to be a fight to the finish—Yuma's finish, supposedly. A short time later his fists crashed through the panels of a locked door and a mighty demon of a man walked out. His clothing was in shreds. Inside the room, debris and wreckage were everywhere, and four men were prostrate on the floor.

"You needn't rub the hide off him," said Penny as she came near. Yuma looked up and grew red in the face. Before the pretty girl, the giant was flushed and bashful.

"Shore, ma'am, I'm right sorry. I—I had a little time on my hands an' seen yore hoss. Bein' as you warn't around, I figgered tuh clean the hoss up some."

"And if I'd been around," replied the girl in a teasing voice, "I suppose you'd have cleaned *me* up."

Yuma stared, mouth open. "Y-y-yew, g-g-gosh, Miss Penelope, I—er—uh...." He paused, completely at a loss.

Penny really enjoyed watching the young giant squirm in his embarrassment. She rested her elbows on a rail of the corral, and hooked the heel of one boot on a lower rail. Leaning back, she watched him for a moment, then said, "What's your name?"

"Folks jest sort o' call me 'Yuma'—that's where I come from, Yuma."

"But everyone has to have at least two names. Don't you have any other?"

"Most o' the gents I seen around this yere Basin lays claim tuh a couple o' names an' lies when they does so." Yuma straightened and looked directly at the girl with his clear blue eyes.

"That remark," she said, "calls for a little expanding. What do you mean?"

"Oh, 'tain't nothin' tuh take offense at," the blond man said slowly. "A lot o' gents in this country left their right names east of the Mississippi, but I'd sooner not use any name than tuh borrow one that might belong tuh some other gent."

Penny feigned a bit of anger. "Do you mean to imply that Cavendish isn't our right name?"

"Aw, shucks, ma'am—nothin' like that. I reckon you an' yore relatives has a right tuh the name, but they hain't many others on this spread that was born with the handle they're usin' right now."

"Go on, Yuma. This is interesting."

Yuma saw Rangoon crossing toward the bunkhouse from the saddle shed. "Thar," he said, "goes a gent that lays claim tuh the name o' Rangoon. Last time I seen him, he called himself Abe Larkin, but he made that name sort o' dangerous by usin' it when he shot up a couple homesteaders near Snake Flats."

"You mean he's a murderer?"

"That's what the law'd like tuh hang him fer bein' if they knowed where tuh reach him."

Yuma took a step closer to the girl, his thumb jerked over his shoulder in the general direction of the open grazing land. "Out thar brandin' cattle," he said, "they's a couple *hombres* that was in the hoss-tradin' business in Mexico last year. They sold hosses tuh some soldiers down thar. Only trouble with that was that they wasn't pertickler whar from the hosses came. When they got catched takin' some hossflesh from a gent named Turner, without payin' fer the same, they shot old Turner."

Penny knew from his manner that Yuma told the truth, but she nevertheless found it hard to believe him. "What are their names?" she asked.

"No one knows their real names, but they draw pay here under the names of Lombard an' Sawtell. As fer me, yuh c'n jest call me 'Yuma.'"

Penny grew serious. "Very well," she said, "I'll call you Yuma."

"I suppose it's right nervy o' me tuh make mention o' this next," said Yuma, "But, I—er—uh...."

"Perhaps," interrupted the girl, "if you think it nervy, you'd better not say it."

"Wal, I'm agoin' tuh jest the same. Now see here, Miss Penelope, I would sure like yuh tuh feel that if ever yuh want someone that yuh c'n count on tuh do somethin', no matter what it is, you'll call on me."

"But I hardly know you," said Penny—then, irrepressibly, "this is so sudden!"

Yuma's eyes dropped. Penny could have bitten her tongue. She had turned the sincerity of the man from Arizona aside with banter. She realized instantly that Yuma sensed the danger others had mentioned and wanted her to know where he stood.

"I'm right sorry," he apologized, "I should o' knowed better'n tuh try tuh suggest that a no-good saddle tramp like me could be of any good tuh a lady like you."

Penny laid a brown hand on the solid arm of Yuma. She felt the hard muscles trembling at her touch.

"Forgive me, Yuma," she said seriously, "I'm sorry. I want you to know that I do appreciate your offer and that you'll be the first one I'll call on if I need a friend."

Yuma looked startled. "Yuh—yuh mean t-t-tuh say ... that is, I mean—you—"

"My friends call me Penny." The girl stuck her right hand out, man-style. "What say, Yuma?—let's be friends."

Yuma hurriedly wiped his right hand on his shirt. He clasped Penny's hand as if it were a delicate thing that might break at a calloused touch. "G-gosh," he said.

Penny left and ran toward Becky's. Yuma watched the girl, who ran as gracefully as a fawn. He looked in awe at his hand, the hand that had touched the girl's slim fingers. Once more he muttered, "Gosh." He saw Las Vegas eyeing him. "Las Vegas," he said to the mustang, "me an' you are downright lucky critters, an' the only difference is that you ain't the brains tuh know it."

CHAPTER VIII - A MATTER OF MURDER

Tonto the Indian was breaking a trail across Thunder Mountain where it was said no horse could travel. In a cavern in Bryant's Gap, a Texas Ranger tossed in the torture of fever and infection. In the Basin, Penelope Cavendish ran to a house whose door had been chalked by Death.

Penny was slightly out of breath from running when she opened the door of Becky's home. The place was of one room, with a cloth partition at the far end shutting off the beds from view. Some of the children must have been in bed, for there were only two in sight, both whimpering and sweaty. The room was like an oven with heat from the stove and humidity from the recent rain. Mort was scolding the uncomprehending baby in the crib and the sobbing child who sat on the floor. Mort's presence was a surprise. It must have been later than Penny had thought. He swung toward his cousin.

"What do you want here?" he demanded.

"Becky invited me for dinner," lied Penny. "I hoped to get here in time to help her." Brushing past Mort she said, "What can I do, Becky?"

The mother of many looked up with tired eyes from the stove.

"What's the use?" she said.

"For dinner!" Mort's voice was loud. "My, but ain't we gettin' to be the class. Invitin' company for dinner." He snatched a big spoon from a table and thrust it into a stew that was on the stove. "You call that swill dinner? You'd come here an' eat the sort of truck she cooks?"

"Please be quiet a minute," said Penny.

Becky broke in. "'Tain't no use lyin' about it, Penny. Mort ain't no fool, an' he knows yuh ain't come tuh eat. Yuh come thinkin' he'd whale me again tuhnite because he catched me in yer room this mornin'. He won't though—yuh needn't have no fear on that score."

Mort looked at Becky with a surprise that equaled Penny's. The tired drudge returned his stare.

"I mean it," she said. The whimpering of the young ones ceased as they became absorbed in the adult conversation. "I've been licked by you fer the last time. Yuh beat me fer hearin' things t'other night, but that beatin' ain't made me fergit what I heard. I know the kind of things that's goin' on in this Basin."

"Yuh know too much," retorted Mort, advancing on his wife with clenched fists. For an instant it looked as if the man were going to strike Becky.

"Go ahead," cried Becky shrilly, "go on an' knock me down an' I'll see to it that there ain't no slip-up the next time I try tuh put you an' yer pack of wolves where yuh belong!"

Penny darted a quick look at the children. They seemed fascinated by the argument between their parents. She felt the embarrassment the others lacked the grace to feel. She was frightened for Rebecca, but Rebecca was a changed personality who now seemed formidable.

"I thought the hull thing over, Mort Cavendish," went on Rebecca, her dark eyes glowing with hatred and defiance. "I ain't nothin' tuh gain by seein' the pack of you jailed. It don't matter tuh me if you an' Bryant an' all the rest of yuh stay here or rot in jail." Her bosom rose and fell quickly with the intensity of her outburst. "Or yuh c'n dangle at the end of a rope. I wouldn't care. I've watched the lot of you Cavendishes, with yer stuck-up 'holier-than-thou' ways. I'm sick of yuh, but I aim tuh stay here just the same. You keep outen this house an' leave me an' the children alone an' I'll keep my lips buttoned up as tuh what I know about yuh! Lay hand on me again, an' this time yuh won't have the chance tuh kill off them that comes fer yuh!"

Mort looked apoplectic, as rage made his face deep scarlet. He trembled visibly with his effort to control himself.

"That's my bargain, Mort—as long as I c'n be rid of you by keepin' quiet with what I know, I'm satisfied tuh go on livin' here an' doin' the best I can tuh raise the young'uns. Take it or leave it."

Mort turned abruptly and strode from the house, banging the door closed.

"Pack of skunks," fumed Becky to no one in particular. "It makes me sick, seein' the way they all think I ain't good enough fer 'em, while every last one o' them is a thievin' killer, takin' orders from Bryant himself!"

"Becky," said Penny, "you can say all you want to about Mort and Vince, or even Wallie and Jeb—"

"Say all I want about anyone!" snapped Becky, with a fire she'd never shown before.

"But when you call Uncle Bryant a crook, you're mistaken," continued the girl, ignoring the interruption. "I know Uncle Bryant is stern, he's as hard as a hickory knot, and he's unforgiving. He resents your being here and he's been mighty mean to you, but he's not a crook!"

"If he ain't a crook, why does he let crooks hang out here? He ain't blind, is he? And as for you, I don't want none of yore sympathy or help, neither. Maybe I ain't no fancy education or high-falutin' clo'es, an' my looks an' figger ain't what they was ten years ago, but I c'n hold my head high afore anyone an' not have tuh admit that I got cousins an' uncles that the law should o' hung some time ago."

"You don't know what you're talking about, Becky. Now calm down and get that meal ready for the kids."

"I don't need you tuh tell me what tuh do," cried the infuriated woman. "I done plenty of thinkin' since this mornin' when you the same as laughed at me fer tryin' tuh warn yuh away from here. Yuh wouldn't believe that this Basin is a hellhole, reekin' with murder plans. All right, don't believe me. I know what I heard in the cottonwoods, an' I heard aplenty. I was a fool tuh send word tuh Captain Blythe o' the Texas Rangers. All it got me was a beatin' an' all the Rangers done was tuh git themselves killed off. 'Stead o' tellin' what I know, I'll keep it private an' make that polecat husband of mine leave me alone tuh save his neck. I reckon he'll keep outen my sight now, all right. He knows that I can fetch the law here any time I want."

Glass from the window crashed in before the sound of the shot reached Penny's ears. She instinctively knew it was a forty-five slug that tore through the window. Her startled half cry of alarm and surprise choked in her throat as she saw Rebecca spin halfway around from the impact of the lead and stagger giddily for several seconds. Then Penny clutched her about the waist and tried to guide her to a chair. Becky's mouth dropped open, her hand clutched her breast, and she stared unbelievingly at the red that seeped between her fingers.

"Easy now," said Penny, "take it easy, Becky." The slim girl found the woman surprisingly heavy to support. She was compelled to ease her to the floor. She

was only vaguely aware of the cries that came from the older children, who raced from beyond the curtains.

"It—it don't hurt much," faltered Becky. "I—I should o' knowed better. Mort ... Mort's the one ... mebbe now you'll believe...." Her voice was weak, so weak that Penny could barely understand what she was saying. Rebecca's body trembled convulsively. Her eyelids fluttered, then opened wide, and her dark eyes looked at Penny with a glaze over them.

"Now," she began slowly, "now you'll believe this Basin is a nest o' killers." The tired eyes closed. Penny lowered the woman's head and felt for a pulse she knew was gone. The children crowded around, wide-eyed and unbelieving. The oldest boy said:

"Now Maw won't have tuh be hurt by Pa no more."

At the brave look in the pinched, small face, Penny choked up. She gathered the lad to her. "No, Billy, Maw won't have any more pain of any sort, and don't you worry. I'm going to take care of you little fellows."

She would have said more, but another crash from outside interrupted. She raced for the window through which the previous bullet had come, and saw a startling sight. Mort Cavendish was clawing at his throat and staggering like a drunken man. But only for an instant. Then his legs caved as he crumpled to the ground.

Penny ran from the house and splashed through the puddles on the ground to where Mort lay. Yuma, running from another direction, reached the fallen man at about the same time.

"Stand back," he said. "I'll tend tuh things." He rolled Mort over. The wound in the neck, just beneath the jawbone, was still clasped by the hand of the unconscious man. Red moisture seeped between his fingers. Yuma drew a bandanna from his pocket, then paused as he looked again at Penny. "I told yuh tuh stand back," he said. "I got tuh have a look at this wound."

"Go on and have a look," snapped the girl. "Feel his pulse and see if he's still alive."

"He's livin', all right, but you vamoose—this mayn't be a pleasant sight tuh see."

"What do you take me for, a sissy? Pull his hand away, and let's see how badly he's hurt." Yuma nodded, muttering beneath his breath. Penny noticed that the big cowboy was now fully composed and at ease. He seemed competent and direct in manner. His flustered embarrassment of the corral was gone. He examined the wound with a skill that showed familiarity with such things. Though it bled profusely, Yuma said, "Just grazed him. I reckon he'll live without no trouble."

"If he lives, he'll hang! He's murdered Becky," said Penny flatly. "And I hope he lives." Yuma, holding the bandanna against the wound, looked at the girl and spoke with an exasperating drawl.

"Maybe you ain't heard straight, Miss Penny, but I tried tuh tell you a little while ago that they don't hang killers in this Basin. What they do is tuh hire 'em an' sleep 'em an' eat 'em an' keep 'em hid so's the law cain't git at 'em."

Penny chose to let the speech pass for the time being. There were other things that needed attention. Yuma looked at the wound and commented, "Maybe I better put a tourniquet around his neck tuh stop the bleedin'."

"A tourniquet would strangle him," advised Penelope.

Yuma nodded. "I know it." Vince came running to investigate the shots, with Jeb ambling behind.

"Who done it, who shot him?" demanded Vince in a loud voice. He elbowed Yuma to one side and bent to examine the wound. "Better git him tuh the house; there's more room there than here in the shack." Yuma nodded silently. "Well, go on," snapped Vince. "Pick him up an' carry him to Bryant's house."

Penny watched the blond Yuma lift Mort off the ground as if he had been a baby. He tossed him over one shoulder as he might have done with a sack of flour and walked toward the house, followed by Vince. Penny turned abruptly and bumped into Jeb, who stood close behind her.

"Oh," she said, "I'm sorry. I've got to get back to Becky's and take care of the children."

Jeb nodded. "What o' Becky?" he asked.

"Mort killed her. I don't know who shot Mort."

Jeb said, "Bryant himself done it. He's standin' on the porch with a rifle right now, watchin' what goes on."

Penny looked and found this to be true.

"His shootin' Mort gives me cause fer a heap more thinkin'," went on the leanest of the Cavendish men. "I figgered I had it all thought out, but this comes up an' throws me off. Men with eyes that ain't no good can't shoot a rifle."

"I've got to go to the poor children."

"Wait, Penelope." Jeb gripped the girl's arm, and lowered his voice. "This is the start," he said mysteriously. "But it ain't the finish. Bryant is fixin' tuh wear a shroud, too."

CHAPTER IX - BRYANT TALKS

The wounded man in the cave sat with his back propped against the rocky wall, fully conscious and aware of his surroundings. For the first time in nearly forty-eight hours he was able to think clearly. Beside him there was a Image – Bryant Talks

health-giving broth, and a sort of biscuit made by Tonto. The food was calculated to make rich blood and new strength in the shortest possible time.

The Texan had slept fitfully during the day, sipping the broth and nibbling food each time he wakened. Now, feeling well rested, he tried to piece the events of the past two days together. Most of the time was vague to him. He remembered that it had been night when he'd crawled, wounded, to the ledge after seeing Silver desert him. Morning light revealed the cave into which he had crept with his torment of pain. Tonto must have found him then, though he could recollect nothing of the Indian's bandaging his shoulder. Most of that day, yesterday, he'd slept. Then, at sunset, Tonto had returned with food and herbs to dress his injuries.

He couldn't remember much of what happened after that, but there were faint recollections of the Indian's crude but nonetheless effective surgery, followed by applications of various sorts. Tonto had been with him all night, plying the skill of the Indian in combating illness. He remembered trying to ask Tonto what had become of Silver, but the Indian had said something about waiting till he was stronger before talking. Then Tonto had left and the wounded man had slept. Now, at sunset, the Indian was due to return.

The Texan examined the food near him and wondered where it came from. It wasn't wild turkey that might have been shot by Tonto, neither was it game that might have been found in the woods. Tonto must have friends close by who supplied that food.

A little while ago, the Ranger had heard sounds that might have been shots, but they were far away. He couldn't yet have implicit faith in all his senses. Now he heard what he thought might be hoofbeats, but again he wasn't sure. He waited, and the sound came nearer. In a moment more there could be no doubt about the rhythmic tattoo on the rocks in the Gap. Horses, two at least, came close and stopped.

A moment later Tonto entered the cave. The Indian looked gratified when he saw that color had returned to the face of the Texan. He examined the wounded shoulder critically, and announced that the infection had gone down considerably and that now there was no longer any doubt about the Ranger's full recovery.

"Me leave camp on mountain," the Indian explained. "Fetch um Silver here."

"Silver?"

"That right, him plenty safe here for time." The Indian explained how huge rocks near the wall of the Gap made a satisfactory hiding place for both the Ranger's white stallion and his own paint horse.

"Where was your camp, Tonto?"

Tonto told about the clearing on the side of Thunder Mountain and the trail that led from the clearing downhill to the Basin and uphill to the mountain's top. From the top of the mountain it was possible, despite all rumors to the contrary, to ride in many directions.

"Then the Basin can be entered without going through this canyon?"

Tonto nodded.

"I've always been told that was impossible."

"It not impossible. You see bimeby. Get rest first. Get well. Then we ride."

The wounded man was eager to leave the cave and start upon a campaign of vengeance in behalf of his fallen comrades, but when he tried to rise, Tonto pressed him back to his seat.

"You wait," he said. "You not ready yet."

The effort made the Ranger quite aware that he was still weaker than he had supposed.

While Tonto rebuilt a tiny smokeless fire of very dry bits of wood and prepared a new supply of hot food, he told how, the day before, he had ridden down the Gap to the spot where the massacre had taken place, and then heard shooting far beyond. He had risked discovery by going as far as the entrance of the Basin. From there he could see the activity around the house. He saw Mort's body carried to the big ranch house and a little later saw the girl, Penelope, take the children to the same rambling structure. Then the body of Rebecca had been taken there. He told all this in his jerky, stilted manner while he put things on the fire to cook and then redressed the Ranger's wounds.

"You need plenty more rest," Tonto told the convalescent man. "We talk more bimeby."

"But, Tonto, tell me more about what you've seen. Did you find or see anything of my guns and cartridge belt?"

"Talk more after you strong."

"Have you any idea who ambushed us?"

"Me got plenty scheme," the Indian said. "Talk bimeby."

"It was you who called Silver away from me—I remember your night-bird's call. Why did you do that?"

Tonto refused to give the Texan any satisfaction. He explained that he had several things that needed doing outside the cave, and that he was in something of a hurry to get away. He further impressed the wounded man with the importance of rest, then more rest, to give the healing broken flesh a chance to mend beyond the danger of tearing open anew.

The freshly made broth was steaming-hot and tasted good. When he finished drinking it, the Ranger felt drowsiness creeping over him again despite all of his recent sleep. The effort of even so short a talk with Tonto seemed to have tired him. He felt strangely secure, now that his Indian friend was with him. The sleep he needed now was natural sleep without the nightmares of the pain and fever.

Tonto watched the white man for some time and marked the regularity with which the sleeping man's chest rose and fell. A trace of a smile showed on the thin lips.

"Plenty rest," the Indian murmured. "Him need plenty rest for things to come." Perhaps Tonto knew that he was being prophetic.

He remained in the cave till after darkness had fallen. Then he proceeded on a grim mission, taking with him a spade. Tonto knew from a previous study of the ground near the scene of the massacre that no one from the Basin had ridden past the dead men lying there. Now, in the darkness, he continued

through the Gap until he reached the point where it opened into Bryant's Basin. He waited there, watching the distant buildings for signs of activity. He wanted to make sure his work of the night could be followed through without interruption. He saw the ranch house brilliantly lighted, and near by the long row of lighted windows that marked the bunkhouse.

The dead men weren't far from the entrance of the Gap; it was less than a quarter of an hour's walk on foot—less than that if a man were mounted. Tonto knew his plans would occupy most of the night, and he must not be found at work. He gathered huge armfuls of dry stalks and dead shrubbery, and spread them over the earth. Anyone entering the Gap would certainly snap a warning that would be heard by Tonto. Then the Indian, shouldering his spade, turned his back on Bryant's Basin and the lighted house, and went to the dead men.

Inside the ranch house Penelope sank exhausted into a chair before the fireplace. Her uncle, sullen and morose, looked up at the girl.

"Get the kids tuh bed?" he asked.

Penny nodded. "We've got to find someone to take care of them, Uncle Bryant—some older woman who will come here."

"I already arranged fer that."

"You have?"

"Wallie spends most of his time in town, so I figgered he'd know more about things there. I told him tuh hire a woman that'll come here an' raise the youngsters."

"Wallie!" Penny couldn't conceal the contempt in her voice.

"I know he's not good fer much, the overdressed lout, but he knows everyone in town from his tomcattin' around. He said he c'd find someone tuh take care of the kids."

Penny stretched her legs toward the fire and slouched back in the chair. The day had been a most strenuous one, beginning with the surprising visit of Rebecca to her room. Then there had been the ride up Thunder Mountain, the meeting with Tonto, and the subsequent return with food for the Indian's friend. These incidents had been made to seem distant, despite the hours, by the shooting of Rebecca and Mort and the endless details that had to be attended to because of them.

With Jeb bandaging Mort's wound while Vince barked instructions, there had been countless last rites that had to be performed for Becky. The dead woman reposed in one of the big house's bedrooms, where she would be until the burial.

Penny watched the dancing flames for several minutes. There were so many things she wanted to discuss that she hardly knew where to begin. Bryant was a hard man, at best, to talk to. The wrong thing spoken, and he'd go into one of his tantrums or retire to a shell of stubborn silence that would tell her nothing.

"Jeb said you were the one who shot at Mort," the girl began.

Bryant nodded. "I sensed things boilin' up between him an' Rebecca fer a long time. I didn't figure he'd go as far as killin' his wife or I'd o' done somethin' before now. I heard the shot he fired an' hoped it'd gone wild—that's why I shot tuh wound him."

"Then you didn't intend to kill him?"

"Course not," snapped Bryant quickly. "Shot tuh wing him, just like I done. Yuh savvy that? I hit right where I aimed!" The old man leaned forward in his chair as he spoke, making a very definite point of what he said.

Penelope nodded. "But now that Mort is going to recover, he'll of course be punished for murder, won't he?"

Bryant's eyes stared hard at the girl. "Who told yuh," he barked, "tuh ask that?" Penny was surprised at his intensity. "Why—why," she stammered, "no one asked me to."

"You sure of that?"

"Of course."

"Yuh sure it wasn't that cowhand called Yuma that put yuh up tuh findin' out what my intentions was regardin' Mort?"

"I haven't talked with Yuma since he carried Mort here to the house." Bryant leaned back, eyes squinting toward the fire, lips pursed in thought. Penny tried to study her uncle's eyes. Was it true that they were failing? If so, how could he have fired with such amazing accuracy? She remembered what Jeb had said just after the shooting: "Men with eyes that ain't no good can't shoot a rifle." Bryant Cavendish was grumbling in an undertone.

"Run this place all my life. Built 'er up from nothin' to one o' the best ranches in Texas. Now I can't turn without bein' told how tuh run my own affairs by every saddle tramp that drifts in here fer work."

"Why did you mention Yuma?" asked Penny.

"I had a row with that upstart this afternoon."

"Oh—" Penny lifted her eyebrows questioningly "—you did?"

"As if I didn't know what's goin' on, on my own property. Why, that pipsqueak from Arizona tried tuh tell me that I was hirin' outlaws! I told him tuh mind his own business an' when I wanted advice from him I'd ask him fer it." Penny calculated that the argument must have been previous to her talk with Yuma, because Bryant and the blond cowhand had had no chance to talk after the shooting, which came almost immediately following her discussion at the corral. This, then, could not have been the cause of the strange change in Yuma's manner. Yuma had been almost antagonistic when she had met him beside Mort's fallen body.

"But, Uncle Bryant," said Penny seriously, "are you sure you haven't any outlaws working here? You might not know them, you see, and Yuma having been outside the Basin until just recently...."

"That'll do," snapped the old man. "I'll run this ranch without help."

"Uncle Bryant, don't bite my head off, I'm just curious. What *are* you going to do about Mort?"

"I aim tuh think the situation over, speak tuh him when he c'n talk, an' then make up my mind. You can tell that Yuma critter that, if yore a mind tuh. I know what he thinks. He thinks I'm runnin' a reg'lar outlaw hideout here an' thinks I'm goin' tuh let Mort get away with murderin' his wife. He'll be waitin' tuh see what I do! Well, he c'n wait!" The subject was on thin ice. Penny knew it would take but little to throw her uncle into a violent rage, but there were things she must have him answer. In her very best manner she leaned close to the old man.

"Uncle Bryant," she said softly, "are you sure you can trust Vince and Mort with the authority you give them?"

"No," was the surprising reply, "I know well I can't trust 'em, but I've got tuh. I can't get around, myself, an' I won't hire bosses from outside tuh boss my own flesh an' blood. I've got tuh let them worthless louts run things."

"I mean—" said Penny. Then she stopped. She was at a loss to know just how to put the question that was foremost in her mind. She felt instinctively that Bryant was honest. She'd known her uncle many years, and had yet to find him engaged in anything that was otherwise. She stared into the fire for some time. Stern, bitter, unbending as the old man was, he had been fair to Penny. Bryant himself was the first to speak. He seemed to be voicing mental ills that had troubled him for some time. "What choice have I got," he said, as if thinking aloud, "I know them four nephews ain't worth a dime. If I could, I'd swap the four of 'em fer a jackass."

He turned to face Penelope. "Vince has a nature that'd pizon a rattler that was fool enough tuh bite him. Wallie ain't worth thinkin' about. Does nothin' but spend all he gets on clo'es that scare the hoss he rides. Goes around with his

hair all mutton-tallowed down an' a face that's pasty as a fish's belly. Jeb ain't worth the powder tuh blow him sky high; he ain't the energy even tuh keep his face washed. Then take—" Bryant spat into the fire "—Mort!" At the mention of the last name the old man's disgust started at the corners of his mouth and finished by drawing the whole mouth out of shape.

"Well, he's finished with murderin' his wife. I hated it when he brought a wife here, Penny. It wasn't that I disliked Rebecca; I never got tuh know her. It would o' been the same with any wife Mort brought here. I know what a worthless pack them men are, an' it was seein' the Cavendish line propagated that riled me." Penny had never heard her uncle speak in this way. It almost seemed as if he were baring the secrets of his soul.

"Now Becky is dead," he said with resignation. "We'll see that she's buried proper an' take care of the kids. Nothin' more tuh do." Bryant pushed himself from his chair and caught hold of the mantel over the fireplace. He leaned partly against it, while he fumbled for his pipe and tobacco. While he filled the pipe and tamped the fragrant weed down with a thumb, the old man went on speaking. "I know what folks think about me, Penny," he said. "Because I've fought hard an' got rich an' minded my own business, they're all quick tuh call me all kinds of a crook." Bryant lighted the pipe and sank back to his chair. His stern manner relaxed, and for a moment he looked like a very tired old man whose troubles were almost too heavy to bear.

"I know the sort yer cousins are," he said at length. "Everybody knows I ain't got where I am by not knowin' how tuh judge men as well as hosses. They're a pack o' hungry buzzards, just waitin' fer me tuh die so's they can cut this property up among 'em. If they thought fer a second that I was hard of hearin' or of seein' or anything else, they'd pounce on that as an advantage tuh them." Bryant's face lighted for a moment. "I guess shootin' Mort like I done will show 'em that I still can shoot straight when I've a mind tuh." Penny couldn't ask then if Bryant's eyes were failing. He'd deny it, no matter what the truth. Bryant blew smoke toward the ceiling. "Only one thing I'm hopin'," he said. "I've got tuh see you taken care of." A rap on the door broke off the conversation. Lonergan, a new man at the ranch, was there. He was much more suave than any of the other employees and seemed something more than just a cowboy, though he lived in the bunkhouse, with the others.

"I've been waitin' fer you, Lonergan," said Bryant.

"I'm ready." Cavendish rose and muttered a word of good night to Penny. Lonergan followed the old man upstairs to the second floor, and a moment later Penelope heard the door of a bedroom close. She went outside, hoping the cool breeze of night would blow some of the confusion from her mind. Someone came toward the porch from the direction of the bunkhouse with a rolling gait. It was Yuma. He doffed his hat when he saw Penny on the porch, and said, "I was sure hopin' you'd be about, Miss Penny."

"I hear that you and Uncle Bryant had some words, Yuma." The moonlight showed the serious look on Yuma's face. He nodded. "That's sort of why I come here. I—I wanted tuh speak with you, ma'am.... I er—"

"Will you sit down?"

"Thanks, but I c'n sort of talk better, standin' up. I dunno just how tuh get in-tuh what I want tuh say, but I ... well, after I shot Mort—"

"*You?*"

"Eh?" said Yuma in surprise.

"Did you say *you* shot Mort?" demanded Penny.

"Sure! I would have drilled him clean if I hadn't been thrown off by yer uncle's shootin'. That's why I come here."

"My-my uncle's shot ... then there were two shots?"

"We both fired tuhgether, Bryant an' me. His rifle bullet jest missed me. It drilled my hat here, as you c'n see." Yuma stuck his finger through a neat hole in his hat. "I was fool enough tuh let Bryant know that I knowed the crooks that was workin' here. He tried tuh kill me so's I couldn't tell no one."

"Yuma, that isn't true. Uncle Bryant fired at Mort. He thought he hit Mort; he told me so." Yuma nodded. "That's what his story'll be," he said, "only, it don't go down with me. I come tuh ask yuh, Miss Penny, if there ain't some place you can go instead o' here."

"But I don't want to go anywhere else. Furthermore, I don't believe what you said about my uncle."

"Yuh won't leave, eh?"

"Of course not! This is my home!"

"It'd be downright unsafe here if somethin' happened tuh Bryant, wouldn't it, ma'am?"

Penny drew herself up stiffly. "Aren't you," she demanded, "having a lot to say—for a cowhand?"

"Mebbe so," the cowboy muttered. "I'm right sorry." With that he turned and walked away. Penny sat down on the steps more bewildered than ever. She felt weak, helpless against the strange confusion of ideas and intrigue, suspicions and apprehensions, in the Basin. She stared across the level ground and saw the mouth of Bryant's Gap brilliantly lighted by the moon.

CHAPTER X - THE LONE RANGER

It was daybreak when the man in the cave wakened in surprise to find that he had slept the night through. A fragrant aroma of coffee and bacon crisping on a fire made him realize that he was ready for a solid meal. Tonto looked up from his cooking and grinned. The Texan felt of his wounded shoulder. He was amazed at the way the swelling had completely disappeared. He could even move his arm without too much pain. He felt alive this morning. He stood. He was a bit unsteady, but his wounded foot would bear his weight, thanks to the manner in which Tonto had bandaged it.

Sunlight streamed past the opening of the cave and turned the Gap bright and cheerful. Cold water dashed into his face made the Ranger wide-awake. He felt of his three-day growth of beard and turned to Tonto. "I must look like a desert rat," he said ruefully.

"That easy to fix. How you feel?"

"First-rate, Tonto, thanks to you."

Tonto beamed and dished up fresh eggs with the bacon. "Today," he said, "you get plenty well."

Food never tasted finer than that breakfast did. When it was finished, the Indian produced the Ranger's duffle, which included, not only shaving materials, but fresh clothing. While the Texan pulled off the mud- and blood-stained remnants of the clothing he'd been wearing, and bathed in the cool stream, the Indian told how he had buried the men in the canyon during the night.

He explained that he'd made six fresh graves, though only five men were dead. Whoever visited the scene of battle, and no one from the Basin had yet done so, might wonder who had done the burying, but the impression would be given that all six of the Rangers had died. The trail would clearly show that but six men had ridden there and six lay buried. There would be no search for a survivor who might carry back to town the news of the massacre. The far-sighted Indian had destroyed the trail made by the one who lived as he had crept from the scene.

The identity of the wounded man was buried in an empty grave. The Ranger saw the wisdom in Tonto's scheme. So far he had no idea who the killers were. If they knew he had survived, they would hunt him down while he had no conception of their identity. With the killers misguided into false security, he would be left unmolested as long as he wasn't recognized as a Texas Ranger.

When he had finished dressing in the clean clothes and boots that Tonto had brought, the Texan sat beside the stream to think. Tonto busied himself about the cave, showing a tact and understanding that was rare in any man. The Indian seemed to know that the Texan wanted to be left alone. He waited to answer what questions might be asked.

The Texan's eyes fell upon a small black book that was on the gravel at his side. It lay open to the flyleaf, and there was an inscription penned in the fine handwriting that engravers try so hard to copy. The man picked up the Bible and looked at his mother's words: "To my son, with all my love and a prayer that he will carry with him always the lessons we studied together."

He remembered candle-lit evenings at his mother's side in a pioneer home. He recalled the time when he had memorized the Ten Commandments, reciting them, then listening to his father's interpretation of the original laws of living as applied to life in the new West. Those laws had seemed so simple, yet so all-embracing. His father had said that life was supposed to be simple and that only man-made laws complicated things.

Man-made laws failed so often. As a Texas Ranger he had seen rich murderers freed by juries while poor men were jailed interminably for stealing food to ward off the death of their starving children. Man-made law couldn't be relied upon to serve the highest form of justice. He thought of his five comrades, now buried in an isolated gap. What law could punish their murderers? How could he find those murderers, and having found them, what proof would there be against them? "Thou Shalt Not Kill." That was the law. Yet who was there to find and punish those who had already killed five brave men? He knew something of the Cavendish clan. In the Basin there were men who would probably give false testimony. There was unlimited money to be spent in bribes if needed. There was Bryant Cavendish, a law unto himself. Against these forces he stood alone, and practically helpless.

In spite of the odds against his success, the Texan found himself breathing a silent pledge to the souls of his friends. "I'll find the ones who did it," he whispered, "and I'll see them made to pay in full."

Even as he spoke he knew of another pledge he'd made. A pledge to his mother that he'd mind the precepts he had learned. One of these was "Thou Shalt Not Kill."

While pledged not to kill, he must confront hard men to whom murder was a mere detail in a day's work. When and if the showdown came, after he had found the murderers he sought, it would probably be a case of kill or be killed. He didn't mind dying if it would serve his ends, but his own death would in no way avenge the lives of his friends. Neither would it serve the cause of justice by ridding the country of inglorious ravagers.

He found himself considering the things in his favor. The fact that he had survived the fight was known only to himself and Tonto. He would not be recognized because of his horse. The only other men who knew that white stallion were dead. He could change his appearance by disguise, if necessary. He wondered if these last few days hadn't already changed his looks. He felt he must have aged considerably. His outlook on life was certainly changed. He no longer felt like the carefree Ranger. He felt older, more serious, more grim.

He rose to his feet and called, "Tonto."

The Indian advanced. In his hand there were guns, holsters, and a heavy cartridge belt. "Maybe now," he said, "you look at guns."

The Texan recognized the brace of perfectly matched and balanced revolvers. "My own!"

Tonto nodded. "After you fall, other Ranger take guns. Tonto find near fight."

The weight of the belt on his hips was good. It gave the man a feeling of competence. He drew the guns and spun them by the trigger guard. Reflected light splashed off the spinning weapons. Then the butts dropped in his palms, and the guns were steady. With those weapons the Ranger had ridden a fast horse at top speed and kept a tin can bouncing ahead of him with bullets. He could—and frequently he had done it—restrain his draw until fast gunslingers had their own weapons free of the holster, and still get the drop on them.

He "broke" one of the guns and dumped the cartridges into the palm of his hand. "You loaded them, eh?"

Tonto nodded.

There was something about the cartridges—they gleamed brilliantly. He studied them a moment, and looked questioningly at the Indian.

"Those bullet," Tonto said, "are silver." It was true. The bullets in the cartridges were hard, solid silver. The Texan looked puzzled. "That makes pretty high-priced shooting," he said.

"You not shoot much," Tonto replied. Then he explained how the precious metal for the bullets had come from the Texan's own silver mine. Tonto himself had cast the metal.

The white man marveled at the complete knowledge Tonto had of him and of his affairs.

Then Tonto brought a mask from beneath his buckskin shirt. It was black, and fashioned to cover the entire upper part of a man's face, effectively concealing all identity.

"Wear this," Tonto said.

The white man hesitated. "If I go about wearing a mask, the law will be in full chase in no time," he said.

Tonto nodded. "You hunt-um outlaw!"

Birds of a feather! By concealing his identity with the mask, his disguise would serve a second purpose. It would mark him in such a way that outlaws might welcome his company and thus put him in possession of information otherwise impossible to secure.

"Other Ranger all dead," said Tonto, as the white man tried the mask and found it a perfect fit. "You only Ranger now. You all alone."

"All alone," repeated the other softly. "Except for you, Tonto. It seems that it's your plan for us to travel together."

Tonto nodded slowly, soberly. He held out his brown hand again. In the palm there was a metal badge. The Texas Ranger's badge. The white man took it, looked at it, then closed his fist about it tightly. "The Texas Rangers," he said softly, "are dead. All six of them have gone. In their place there's just one man. The lone Ranger." He put the badge deep in his pocket and murmured again, "The Lone Ranger."

CHAPTER XI - THE LONE RANGER RIDES

The lone ranger kept the mask across his eyes and experimented with his guns. His shoulder made it hard for him to draw the gun on his left, but he found that his smooth speed seemed to have suffered no loss when he drew the other shining weapon. As a test he unloaded and holstered the pistol. "I'll just make sure," he muttered to Tonto. Standing with his right hand straight before him, palm down, he placed a pebble on the back of his hand. He dropped the hand with almost invisible speed, jerked out his gun, leveled it, and snapped the hammer back, then down. All this was done before the pebble touched the ground. Tonto grinned at the demonstration and said, "That do."

The masked man sat down and replaced the cartridges in his gun's cylinder. "So we're going to travel together," he said. Tonto nodded slowly. The Lone Ranger liked the idea. Tonto's unequaled knowledge of woodcraft and his animal-like skill in following a trail that was invisible to white men would make him a powerful ally. Tonto told about the cattle trails he'd found beyond the top of Thunder Mountain, and the trail that led from the mountain's top to the clearing and beyond into the Basin. He told of his suspicions that stolen cattle were harbored in the Basin. When the masked man asked where Tonto had secured the food he'd brought, the Indian evaded answering. His pride had suffered when he had been compelled to ask a girl to help him. He felt just a little bit like many of the vagrant, begging Indians that were so despised in certain parts of the country. Nothing but the urgent need of his friend would have prompted Tonto to request those favors, and he fully intended some day to wipe out the obligation. The Lone Ranger didn't press the point.

Tonto did, however, answer many questions that had bothered the masked man when he explained how he happened to find the cave. He had heard shots in the Gap, and gone toward the sound. Scrambling down a rocky side of the canyon in the dark, he had seen a white horse dimly outlined in the darkness. He hadn't suspected that the horse was Silver, but instinctively he had sounded the birdlike trill that Silver knew. When the big stallion came to Tonto's side, he saw that there was no equipment behind the saddle and assumed that Silver was alone. He had led Silver into hiding until dawn, when he followed the back trail to the scene of murder. Signs there showed that one man had gone wounded from the scene. He followed, then, the blood-marked trail until he came to the cave.

"As simple as all that," the masked man commented when Tonto finished his recital. "If I hadn't been so nearly unconscious, I'd have recognized your whistle."

The two spent most of the forenoon making plans and preparations. The masked man's wounds still bothered him, but he felt equal to a long ride and he was eager to get started on his investigation. He wore the mask continually, so it would become a familiar part of him, and not something strange that hampered his movements.

After their noon meal the two were ready, with their duffle loaded on the backs of Scout and Silver. The white horse seemed eager to be in action once again with his master in the saddle. He whinnied jubilantly when the cinch was pulled tight, and his great strength showed in every rippling muscle beneath his snow white coat.

Tonto mounted Scout, then waited. The Lone Ranger placed one foot in the stirrup and shouted, "Hi-Yo Silver!" The big horse lunged ahead. "Away-y-y," the ringing, clear voice cried as the masked man settled in the saddle. Silver was a white flame leaping ahead, with silky mane and tail blown straight out by the wind, like the plumes of a knight in white armor. Sharp hoofs hammered on the hard rocks in a tattoo that thrilled like rolling drums. Silver had his master in the saddle, Tonto close behind him. The master's voice rang out again to echo both ways in the canyon, "Hi-Yo Silver, Away-y-y-y." Tonto, watching from his saddle close behind the mighty Silver, whispered, "Now Lone Ranger ride."

A stretch of flat tableland extended for several miles between the rim of the Gap and the foot of Thunder Mountain. After the first thrilling dash, the Lone Ranger slowed Silver to let Tonto take the lead and set the route. The Indian knew exactly where to go to reach the mountain's top without passing through the Basin. The masked man was not strong enough for great activity, but Tonto anticipated none for the time being. The purpose of this trip was merely one of observation. The Indian intended to point out cattle trails he'd

seen, and study them. In so doing he and the Lone Ranger would get further away from the danger of the cave's proximity to the Basin killers.

Tonto felt sure that the ride wouldn't overtax the masked man. He knew his white friend was perfectly at home in the big saddle and perhaps far more comfortable than he'd be chafing with inactivity in the cave.

After an hour or so of riding, the ground became more rocky and difficult. Just ahead the mountain rose majestically. Thunder Mountain didn't divulge her secret dangers. At first the ground sloped only gently upward, with an occasional large tree that gave soft shade. Like a seductress in green, the mountain lured the stranger on with promises of things that were ahead. The trees became more frequent; then larger trees with tangled vines in close embrace made travel harder. As the climb became steeper, leafy discards which had rotted to soft loam gave birth to rank weeds.

The inclination increased so gradually that one wasn't aware that it was changing. The Lone Ranger realized quite suddenly that his horse was laboring. The weeds had become a crazy tangle, merging with the vines that hung from overhead like spectral streamers. There was a constant clammy caress of invisible cobwebs on the Lone Ranger's face, and the less subtle, sometimes painful brushing of tree trunks against his thighs.

Silver's coat became blood-flecked where briars and brambles raked the skin. The riders had frequently to crouch or be swept from the saddle by low, far-reaching branches. None but Tonto could possibly have followed this weird and devious route.

Daylight in the woods was at best twilight. Human intrusion brought a constant cacophony of cries and chattered complaints from birds and beasts. No breeze could possibly penetrate this fastness, and the breath of the decaying things was hot and fetid as it rose from the ground. The most distant horizon was within arm's reach. Underbrush so high that it reached overhead rose from slime that was sometimes ankle-deep.

The ride seemed endless, but the end came without warning. Breaking through a particularly dense cover of berry canes with briars that hurt, the riders found it clear ahead. The land was hard and almost arid. A thought made the masked man smile despite his exhaustion. Old Thunder Mountain needn't be so proud—her head was bald. Wind and rain had swept the summit clean except for a few gaunt stumps of lightning-blasted trees.

Tonto was at the masked man's side, offering to help him from the saddle.

"Now we rest," he said. "You need rest plenty bad."

"I'm able to go on, Tonto. It's good to be riding again."

Tonto shook his head. "We stop here. You rest. Tonto talk."

CHAPTER XII - A LEGAL PAPER

In the clear air one could see for miles from the top of Thunder Mountain. The Basin, most of it at least, was hidden by the foliage, but the view in the opposite direction encompassed endless plains that led to ranches beyond the horizon. The masked man wondered how many of those ranches had contributed to the crisscrossing of cattle tracks on the bald dome where he stood.

Tonto pointed out the things that he'd observed on previous visits and indicated where a trail had been cut to make a descent straight into the Basin. Meanwhile, most of the people in the Basin went to Becky's funeral. It was a simple ceremony without tears, conducted by Jeb Cavendish. No one who had known Rebecca's life could feel sorry for her for having been released. Penny held the hands of the oldest children during the burial.

She frequently felt the eyes of Yuma, standing unhatted with a number of other men, upon her, but each time she looked at the blond cowboy he was staring at the ground. Vince was there, and so were most of the cowhands. Wallie was somewhere away from the Basin. Bryant had a distant view from his seat on the porch of the house. Mort was still in bed with a bandage around his neck. Jeb seemed to enjoy his brief period as the center of attraction and postponed conclusion of the services as long as possible. When he ultimately pronounced a benediction, Yuma hurried away as if on important business. Penny led the dry-eyed youngsters toward the house. Gimlet, the cook, advanced to meet her.

"Lemme take care o' the young 'uns, Miss Penny," the old man said. "Keeeeripes, I ain't had the chance tuh tell a pack of lies tuh kids since you growed up." Penny was grateful. The children had been her responsibility since Rebecca's death, and she welcomed the chance to get away and think for a little while. "I'll be around," she said, "when you have to start supper."

"Don't yuh do it now, Miss Penny, don't you do nothin' o' the sort. You leave the kids with me an' let 'em stick by me. It'll do 'em good tuh talk tuh someone 'sides them glum-actin' cousins of yores with their souls full o' vinegar till it shows in their faces." Penny smiled, "It's a deal, Gimlet. They're your responsibility till bedtime." The children, heretofore ignored, were wide-eyed at the thought that anyone could actually want their company. Gimlet's manner seemed forced. Penny fancied her old friend had worries about which he said nothing.

"Yew git," he said, spanking the oldest boy playfully. "I'll be right along an' meet yuh by the kitchen door." When the children had gone, the old man with one eye turned to Penelope.

"I got somethin'," he said, "tuh tell you."

"Yes, Gimlet?"

"I on'y got one eye, but my ears is first-rate. Mebbe I orter keep my big mouth shut, but I figger yuh orter know that yer Uncle Bryant is up tuh somethin'."

"Uncle Bryant?" Penny's tone showed her surprise. She knew that Gimlet was one friend upon whom she could count. The old cook had dandled her on his knee when as a child she had come to live in the Basin. She listened eagerly.

"Heard him talkin' tuh that no-good, gambling smooth-talkin' *hombre* named Lonergan," said Gimlet. Penny remembered that Lonergan had called the night before. Bryant had taken him upstairs, behind closed doors.

"Curiosity has allus been my trouble, an' when I heard talkin' between them two, I didn't shut my ears none. Couldn't git much o' what uz said, but the two of 'em was workin' over some sort o' legal paper." "What about it?" asked Penny. "Uncle Bryant has a right to make a contract or agreement with someone." "Wal, all's I know is that I heard Bryant ask Lonergan if he was dead sure the paper'd stand in court after he was dead and gone." Penny wanted to laugh at Gimlet's obvious concern over what was probably a will. His seriousness, however, impressed her.

"That ain't all," said the old man. "I heard more. I heard Bryant sayin' he wanted tuh leave what he owned tuh them that deserved it, an' he didn't want none of his relatives contestin' the will in court o' law."

"But after all, Gimlet, it's Uncle Bryant's ranch and he can do what he wants with it."

"Nuther thing," growled Gimlet, "they's a puncher here, callin' hisself, 'Yuma.'"

"What about him?" "Yuh c'n trust that big maverick, Miss Penny. He thinks a heap about you." Penny said nothing. Gimlet went on with a lengthy discourse about the fine qualities of Yuma. He and Yuma had spent hours in close confab in the kitchen, and Yuma had expressed his feelings, confidentially, to Gimlet. Penny's face grew red as the frank old man continued. Finally she cut him off. "Those children are waiting for you, Gimlet."

"All right, I'm a-goin' tuh 'em. But you jest remember that Yuma is ace-high with me an' yore ace-high with *him*." Gimlet shuffled toward the kitchen door. Penny wanted to get away from the surroundings and be alone with her thoughts. She had at least two hours before her uncle would be expecting her for the evening meal. Hurriedly she changed to riding clothes and left the vicinity on Las Vegas. She discounted the seriousness of all that Gimlet had said about her uncle's "legal paper." Obviously just a will. The thing that concerned her most was the truth about Bryant's eyes. During the day she had tried to observe him carefully. There were times when she was sure he had trouble seeing things. Then she thought he had truly fired at Mort, but failing eyes had made his shot go wild and coincidence had made it drill Yuma's hat.

There were other times when Bryant seemed to reach directly, without a trace of groping, for whatever he desired, and then she wondered. There was no doubt in her mind that Vince and Mort were involved in something or other that they didn't want too generally known. What of the men, the Texas Rangers, who Becky had said came to investigate and died for it?

Lost in her thoughts, the girl rode on without thought or direction. She let the reins hang slack and paid no attention to the tangle of growing things that brushed past her. She was surprised, when she came back to reality, to find that Las Vegas had carried her up Thunder Mountain. She was well beyond the lower part of the path where it was rough.

"Might as well keep going now," she said. There was sugar in her pocket, put there for Las Vegas. Well, this time the mustang could do without his customary sweet. She'd save it till she reached the clearing, and see if she could bribe attention from the silver stallion. The Indian-what did he call himself? Tonto—that was it. Tonto had said that a friend was wounded. She wondered if by any chance this friend could be one of the Texas Rangers. She thought it quite unlikely, in view of the fact that all of them were said to have been killed. Well, she'd ask Tonto anyway. The clearing was just ahead. She saw the form of a horse through the trees, and then a man. His back was toward her. She saw him turning as he heard the hoofs approaching. The man was not her Indian friend—neither was he a stranger to the girl. He was one of the last people in the world she cared to meet in such a place—the killer who called himself Rangoon.

CHAPTER XIII - HELP WEARS A MASK

Penny couldn't turn back without making herself appear ridiculous. Rangoon had already seen her, and was grinning a welcome. He took his hat off with a flourish and revealed black hair, parted low on one side and plastered down upon his forehead with a carefully nurtured dip. His hair gleamed from greasy stuff that he used on it.

"Wal," he said with the air of a welcoming host, "this is a downright surprise."

Penny halted at the edge of the clearing. It was the first time she had seen Rangoon at close range, and she found him wholly repugnant. His face was pitted from smallpox, scarred from a knife brawl, and generally greasy with sweat, but it was his eyes that made him hideous. They were small, bloodshot, and set too close together. He had only one eyebrow, which extended clear across the ridge of his receding forehead, serving both eyes. The expression in the eyes was one of confidence and insolence.

Instinctively, Penny felt that she should turn at once and ride back home. Rangoon advanced on foot, and held a hand toward her.

"I'll help yuh down from the saddle," he said.

"I'm not dismounting, I was just about to turn back."

"I don't reckon you'll want tuh turn back right now," Rangoon said. "There's somethin' over here you'll be right glad to have a look at."

"I doubt it." Penny tried to jerk the reins around, but Rangoon was holding them. "Please let go of my reins, Rangoon. I'm going home."

Rangoon shook his head slowly. "I wouldn't," he said, "if I was you. I understand that yer uncle'd be right sore if he found you'd rid up here in spite of all he's said about it."

Penny pulled suddenly and hard, but vainly.

"It ain't no use tryin' tuh pull free jest yet," Rangoon advised her, "because I aim tuh have yuh take jest one look at what I seen. Then yore free tuh go, if yuh want tuh."

Penny was armed: she wore a small-caliber revolver on a belt around her waist. She felt that she could use this if necessary. She was more angry than frightened. She dismounted, ignoring the offered hand of the pock-marked man. He shrugged his shoulders as if to say it didn't matter. She noticed that his own horse was tethered to a near-by tree.

"What is it you want to show me?"

"I suppose," Rangoon said slowly, "you're downright disappointed that it's me yuh seen here instead of yer other friend."

Penny noticed the use of the word "other." It implied that in his mind Rangoon had no intention of considering himself in the humble position of a waddie on her uncle's ranch, but rather as one on an equal social footing. Penny made no comment.

"Yuh wonder how I know about him, eh?" Rangoon said. "Wal, there is what I wanted yuh tuh see." He pointed to the ground.

Penny saw the marks of her small boots clearly showing where she had stood yesterday. Near by were the prints that Tonto's moccasins had made. Penny stared and felt herself growing cold with fury at the realization of what she knew must be in Rangoon's foul mind. Not only were the prints there together, but both pairs led toward the lean-to.

"'Tain't as if it was one of the boys from the Basin," the tantalizing voice behind her said, "but a critter wearin' moccasins! That might mean a redskin."

Penny acted instinctively. She whirled quickly and swung with all the force of her arm. Her gloved hand smacked against the scar on Rangoon's cheek.

Then she burned with embarrassment. Any explanation would be futile. She walked quickly toward her horse.

"Not so fast," Rangoon said sharply, grabbing Penny's arm.

"You let go of my arm, or I'll shoot you."

"Oh, yuh will huh?"

In that instant Penny was ready to kill. All reasoning left her. The hand on her arm brought her fury to white heat. She snatched for her gun, but Rangoon slapped the weapon from her hand.

Rangoon released his grip on her arm, and caught up the reins of her horse. "Jest git yer senses while I tie up yer hoss, an' we'll talk."

Released, the girl made a dive for her gun, which was on the ground. Rangoon saw the motion, and put his foot on the weapon.

"I'll fix that," he growled. He picked up the gun and emptied it of cartridges. "Now you c'n have the shootin' iron back," he said, handing it to her while he tossed the ammunition deep among the heavy brush. Penny took her weapon mechanically and put it, empty, in her holster.

Fear gripped her for a moment when she realized that she was practically helpless. To turn and race away on foot would be a futile gesture. She thought of fainting, but that wouldn't help matters any. She looked defiantly at Rangoon.

"What do you want to talk about?"

"Now, that's more like it. Yuh needn't be scairt of me; I don't aim tuh hurt yuh none." There was a definite sneer in both the voice and expression while the man tossed Las Vegas' reins about a tree and knotted them.

"Don't get the notion that you gotta fight fer yer honor an' all that sort o' tripe like in the readin' books. I don't aim tuh git shot up by men in the Basin fer makin' passes at you. I like my women without no killin' fights tied ontuh them."

Penny stubbornly refused to let her face indicate her feelings. She stood, chin up, listening.

"First of all," Rangoon said, "I hanker tuh know why yuh rid up here."

"It's none of your business."

"Goin' tuh be stubborn again, eh? Now you'll git home a sight quicker if yuh answer my questions."

"Why are you here?" countered Penny.

"That's easy. I tell, then you tell," Rangoon grinned. "Makin' a sort o' game of it, eh? Wal, yesterday I seen smoke comin' outen the treetops. I wondered who was campin' here, but couldn't git away from the Basin tuh see. I rid up tuhday an' found some downright interestin' footprints. Now it's yore turn tuh tell jest what they mean."

"And then you'll let me leave here?"

"Talk first."

"I used to ride up this way before I went to school. I came up yesterday and found a friendly Indian camped here."

"Why?"

"How do I know?"

"Yuh rid up here twice."

Penny hadn't credited Rangoon with such skill at reading signs.

"Yes, I came up twice."

"The redskin had two horses with him. What about 'em?"

Penny, while hating herself for enduring the man's insolence, felt that there was no use trying to evade the truth, which after all was harmless. She told Rangoon about bringing food for the Indian's friend.

When she mentioned the friend, Rangoon showed keen interest.

"Who was that there friend?"

"I don't know."

"Where was he at?"

"I don't know that either. I've told you all I know, Rangoon."

The man shook his head slowly, "'Tain't enough. I got tuh know the rest."

Penny was defiant. "I've told you all I know and now I'm starting back for the Basin. If I'm not there Uncle Bryant will wonder why, and I'll tell him why I was delayed. You ought to know him pretty well, Rangoon. He won't take this sort of behavior from you!"

Rangoon threw back his head and laughed hard at this.

"Yer uncle won't hurt *me*," he said between two roars of laughter.

Penny made a sudden dive for the knotted reins. Again Rangoon was quicker. He caught her in strong hands.

"Yuh ain't leavin'," he said, "till yuh tell who the redskin's friend is, an' where he's hidin'."

"I tell you I don't know." Penny struggled to free herself.

"I'll wring it out of yuh," Rangoon bellowed as he wrapped his long arms completely around the girl and nearly cut off her wind in a bearlike grip.

"L-let m-me g-go," gasped Penny.

Rangoon's grip was tighter. His arms were crushing the slim girl to him, bending her back until it hurt frightfully. His ugly face was close to her, his breath, foul with alcohol and half-rotted teeth, was hot. Penny felt nauseated, violently ill.

Contact with the girl made Rangoon reckless. He seemed to forget any fear he might have had.

His voice was hoarse as he shouted to Penny, "Who is that Indian's friend?"

His repeated question was simply an excuse to hold the girl. His voice was hoarse. "Who is that Indian's friend?"

"I am!"

It was a new voice, a deeply resonant one that spoke from behind Rangoon.

"Stand back," the same voice snapped.

Rangoon swore and whirled as he snatched out his gun with catlike speed and agility. The releasing of the girl, the turning, the drawing, and the firing, all seemed part of one smooth flowing movement that came from instinct.

Wide-eyed, Penny saw Rangoon's gun jump as it lashed flame and smoke toward the newcomer. The gun seemed a thing alive—it leaped free of Rangoon's hand and flew in an arc across the clearing. Rangoon screamed a livid curse of pain as he gripped his gun hand.

The stranger, standing ten feet away, had his own weapon back in its holster. Penny saw that the man was tall; his hat was white and clean, and his face was masked.

Rangoon's hand must have hurt terribly, to judge from his violent cursing. Penny had a dazed, detached feeling as she watched the two men. Rangoon, still cursing, held a hand that stung from the force of the bullet that had knocked his own gun away.

The stranger with the mask stepped forward and slapped Rangoon on the face. The blow did not appear to be hard-swung, but it sent Rangoon sprawling on the ground.

"That's enough of that talk," the stranger said in his crisp but nonetheless pleasant voice. Penny heard another sound, and turned as Tonto came from behind the trees.

The masked man spoke again. "You're not hurt badly. My bullet struck your gun, not your hand."

"You'll pay fer this," Rangoon cried. "I'll see yuh shot up, a little at a time—I'll have my men git yuh, you wait."

The Lone Ranger turned to Tonto. "You'd better gag him, Tonto," he said. "It's going to be hard to talk above that noise."

Tonto grinned and leaped astride Rangoon, who made no attempt to rise from the ground. What the killer said was muffled as Tonto jammed a knotted cloth into his mouth.

"When he's gagged, rope him."

Tonto nodded and his expression said, "Gladly."

Penny watched with interest. She knew she should mount and ride at once for the Basin, but there was something about the masked man that held her, and there were things she wanted to ask. Who was this stranger whose chin was so well shaped? Why was he masked? She instinctively liked him, aside from the help he'd given her. She liked his efficient manner of handling Rangoon.

Beyond the trees she caught a glimpse of Silver. This, then, was the man to whom she had sent food. The man for whom Tonto had asked help. This was the owner of the magnificent stallion.

"Friend," she thought. "That's who he is. Tonto's friend." She remembered the way Tonto had spoken of him, then understood the tone the Indian had used when he said, "My friend."

CHAPTER XIV - THE TRAIL LEADS DOWN

When Rangoon was tied, the Lone Ranger dragged him across the clearing and placed him with his back propped against a tree.

"You'll probably be here for some time," he said. "I'll take that gag out of your mouth if you can keep quiet."

The gag removed, the masked man studied Rangoon's face for fully a minute. "What's your name?" he asked.

Rangoon glared darkly from beneath the connected eyebrows. His mouth, already distorted somewhat by the scar on his cheek, was drawn even further back when he said in a slow voice that fairly dripped with hate, Penny spoke. "He calls himself Rangoon."

The Lone Ranger nodded. "It seems to me that I've seen him when he had another name." He turned to Penelope. "You, of course, are Penelope Cavendish," he said, more as a statement than a question. The girl nodded while her eyes remained fixed on the face beneath the mask, and the mask itself. She hadn't noticed the slight limp when the Lone Ranger walked; the shoulder bandage was covered by his shirt. Her feeling was one of admiration and gratitude, but most of all resentment. She felt that Tonto had misled her. It was inconceivable that the man before her could so recently have been desperately in need of food. He didn't look helpless. He certainly hadn't acted helpless when he saw Rangoon. Yet Tonto had implied that his plight was serious. Perhaps need of concealment, not starvation, had kept the masked man hidden while Tonto sought food.

Though Penny liked his voice and manner and the way he'd handled Rangoon, she could judge him only by facts and circumstances. He had come to the clearing—Rangoon was in the clearing. Wasn't it obvious that they came there to meet? Rangoon, known as an outlaw—the newcomer masked. True, the masked man had fired at Rangoon while Rangoon fired at him, but wasn't this perhaps an act for her benefit? Neither man was injured. These were the facts. To Tonto, Penny said, "I didn't know your friend was an outlaw." Tonto began to speak, but Penny continued. "If I had, I certainly wouldn't have brought food for you to take to him."

The Lone Ranger spoke quickly, "Are you the one who brought Tonto that food?" "Of course. Didn't he tell you?" "No," said the masked man, glancing at Tonto, "he did not." Tonto was highly uncomfortable. "If I had known where that food came from," the Lone Ranger said, "I might not have—"

"I suppose," interrupted Penny, "the fact that you had food from the Cavendish family complicates things for you." The Lone Ranger looked at the girl somewhat surprised. She went on, speaking slowly and significantly. "It must make it a trifle difficult for you to go ahead with your plans." Could Penelope know his plans and suspicions? The masked man tried to fathom the enigmatic expression in the girl's face. Did she know that he felt a strong suspicion that her uncle was hiring crooks to bring stolen cattle to the Basin? Did she realize that his purpose was to fix the guilt of murder on Basin killers? He said, "It might make everything more complicated than you realize, Miss Cavendish." He took a step toward her. "I want you to understand one thing."

"Oh, please." There was annoyance in the girl's tone. "Don't let's talk any further. You've helped me, and if you feel that I helped you, we're square. I'd sooner let it go at that and start for home."

"It can't go at that," the Lone Ranger said decisively. "The fact that you've saved my life puts me in a peculiar position." He drew a cartridge from his belt. "Take this," he said offering the bullet, "and if there is any man in the world whose life means a great deal to you, tell him to carry it at all times."

Penny looked at the silver bullet in the palm of the masked man's hand.

"Silver?" she asked curiously, in spite of herself. "Yes." "So you want to repay me by agreeing to spare one life." She drew up proudly. "Keep your bullet. We are quite able to defend ourselves against you." Turning abruptly, she mounted Las Vegas and rode quickly away. As Penelope guided Las Vegas downhill she felt as if a buoyant hope had been punctured to sink into a black sea of despair. Her confidence in Tonto had been great, and despite what she had heard about the murder of the Texas Rangers, some tiny voice far deep inside her kept whispering that she should count on the man whom the Indian called "friend." She had to count on someone.

Yuma thought that her uncle was a leader of killers. Penny felt otherwise. She had hoped somehow to find a strong, stanch friend who would feel as she did. Seeing Tonto's friend, she saw a masked man. A man who offered to spare the life of the one she loved most, in order to repay her for food. Now she had no one to turn to but Bryant Cavendish. Stubborn, bitter, unreasonable old man that he was, he'd have to listen to her. He must be made to understand the forces that were piling up in his own home. He must be shown that Mort and Vince were scheming with Rangoon, perhaps with others; taking orders from an unknown chief; ambushing Texas Rangers; murdering and Heaven only knew what else. Bryant must be made to understand that his own life was probably in danger and must send word out for law men, many law men, to come and help. Becky had got word to the Texas Rangers. Bryant must find and use the same means, but this time they must reach the Basin without being ambushed.

Bryant would be hard to talk to, but the time for diplomacy in handling him was past. She rode on, not knowing that old Gimlet was waiting for her with stunning news. Meanwhile, instead of replacing the silver bullet in his cartridge belt, the Lone Ranger put it in his pocket. He drew the Indian aside, out of hearing of Rangoon.

"Don't you see the spot we're in now, Tonto? If Bryant Cavendish is in charge of the Basin, as he's always been, he's the man we want. I'm alive to get him, only because of what his niece did for me. She may have given me a life that I've dedicated to the hanging of the man she cares for. I've got to know her feelings." Tonto nodded his agreement, looking quite dejected.

"I don't think Bryant himself did the killing, Tonto, but unless things have changed since the last reports came out of Bryant's Basin, he rules his little kingdom with a mailed fist and there isn't a thing that goes on there that he doesn't order. If killers are there, he brought them there. The Texas Rangers must have died because Bryant Cavendish sent men out to kill them." Tonto studied the tall man's eyes and noted that there was a new intensity in the gray depths. "Maybe now," he said, "we make-um camp. You need rest."

"There isn't time to rest now. Penelope Cavendish believes I'm one of the outlaws. If she thinks Bryant is on the level and tells him about seeing me, he'll make things too hot. We've got to strike before he can act. It'll soon be dark enough to get to the Cavendish house without being seen, and I'm going there. "Cavendish is an old man. At best he hasn't many years to live. His niece, if she loves him, can keep him. But we're going to take the killers that work for him and he's going to give us the evidence that will hang them."

The Lone Ranger spoke softly, but with a calm determination that told Tonto there was little use in trying to persuade him to postpone a meeting in a murderers' retreat.

"What's more," the Lone Ranger finished, "he's going to put that evidence in writing." "Tonto go with you," the Indian said. "We leave Rangoon feller tied here." "No, Tonto; I'm going alone." Tonto tried to convince the Lone Ranger that he was risking his life, that he needed help, that he should not ride unaccompanied into the Basin; but the masked man shook his head.

"My plans are better, Tonto. We're going to leave Rangoon here by the trail these men use in going from the Basin to the outside. The first ones who come through here will find him. They'll release him and there will be some talk. I want Rangoon to think that both of us have ridden to the Basin. We'll start out down the trail, but you'll turn back and hide near by to hear what's said. I'll ride into the Basin, have a showdown talk with Cavendish, and meet you later in our cave in the Gap." The masked man pointed out how Tonto's natural abilities made him the logical one to wait in the forest. No white man could maintain the vigil with the absolute silence that was so imperative. On the other hand, the Indian's scant knowledge of white men's laws and courts of law made him a poor one to dictate the sort of statement that must be secured from Bryant Cavendish.

The two returned to the proximity of Rangoon and made ready to start riding.

"Yuh can't leave me here," the scar-faced outlaw shouted. The Lone Ranger looked at him and said deliberately, "Why not?"

"What if I starve, what if I'm et up by animals?"

"That," retorted the masked man, "would be easier than the way the Snake Flats homesteaders died when Abe Larkin killed them."

Rangoon's eyes went wide at the mention of the name he formerly had used and the people he had killed.

"What d'yuh know about them?" he cried.

"The law is still keeping a noose ready for Abe Larkin."

"Where yuh goin'?" There was panic in Rangoon's voice as he saw the two mount and point their horses toward the Basin. The Lone Ranger said, "Come on, Silver."

Rangoon tugged at his ropes, struggled with them until his wrists were almost bleeding. His courage, as darkness fell in the woodland clearing, ebbed until he was reduced to a sniveling, sobbing wretch with scant resemblance to the swaggering monster that had bullied Penelope.

"Who," he cried aloud, "who was he? Who was that masked man with the silver bullets? He called me Abe Larkin. Who was he?" Somewhere, unseen in the darkness, a crouching Indian grinned.

CHAPTER XV - INTRIGUE COMES CLOSER

When Penny reached home just after dark, she noticed a peculiarly deserted air about the ranch. Most of the horses belonging to the cowboys were gone from the corral when she turned Las Vegas in. The shack where Becky had lived was dark, and the big house nearly so. There was one lamp burning in the living room, and the kitchen wing was lighted. That was all. The usual bunkhouse sounds of laughter, or murmuring voices against an occasional accordion or guitar background, were not there. Penelope entered by the kitchen door. Gimlet rose to greet her, with anxiety showing in every one of the enumerable lines on his battered old face.

"Keee-ripes!" burst out Gimlet. "Where you been?" Penny was somewhat taken aback by the old man's obvious agitation. "What's the matter, Gimlet? Is anything wrong?"

"That's jest it, I dunno. It seems like all's due tuh bust loose an' yet they ain't a thing I c'n put a finger on. They's things bilin' up, I tell yuh. I was scared near tuh death somethin'd happened tuh you."

"But why?"

"Yuh sure everything's all right with yuh? Yuh ain't met with no trouble?"

"What kind of trouble? Where is everyone?"

"I dunno what kind, jest trouble. Trouble like bein' shot at, or like havin' threats made at yuh."

Penny shook her head. "I rode quite a way," she said, "and didn't realize it was so late. Where is Uncle Bryant?" It was when Gimlet replied that Penny felt her first frustration. "He's gone, an' who knows where to, or why."

"Gone," echoed the girl. "Didn't he say anything?"

"He come here tuh the kitchen, told me tuh pack some vittles in a sack, an' stayed while I done it. He took the sack, tho'wed it intuh the buckboard, which same had two strong hosses all hitched, then fetched Mort outen the house with his neck still bandaged, an' the two druv off." Penny hadn't known Bryant to leave the Basin in years. Yet she knew Gimlet must be telling the truth. "Didn't he say when he was coming back?" she asked.

"Not a word." Penny had counted on a heart-to-heart talk with her uncle. Now that the talk was out of the question, at least for the time being, she felt a hopelessness that made her aware of how much she had counted on that talk.

"How long ago," she said, "did Uncle Bryant leave?"

"Jest a little while after the argyment."

"Argument? What argument?"

"Him an' that cowboy callin' himself Yuma had another set-to."

"Yuma?" In her confusion of emotions Penny could do little more than echo what Gimlet said.

"I tell yuh, they's been things goin' on, but nothin' I c'n lay a finger on. Bryant an' Yuma talked low fer a time, then both got tuh howlin'. I c'd hear some o' what 'uz said. Yuma was callin' on Bryant tuh see to it that Mort got what he deserved."

"That's what Uncle Bryant would tell him."

"Yuma said he'd done some thinkin' since the last row they had an' he figgered that if Mort wasn't given what a killer sh'd git, it was because Bryant didn't care what went on in the Basin."

"Oh, if Yuma could only understand Uncle Bryant!" said Penny. "Uncle Bryant can't be bulldozed into doing anything. One way to make certain he doesn't turn Mort over to the law is to order him to do it."

"They had aplenty o' hot words," said Gimlet, shaking his head slowly. "They was a heap o' cussin' on both sides. When I heard what Bryant told about the shootin' of Becky, I was fit tuh be tied, I was so gol-darn mad."

"What did he say?" asked Penny eagerly.

"Said that Mort told him he never had no intent o' shootin' Becky." Penny's lips compressed.

"Mort claimed that he seen a snake, a rattler an' a big one, an' he was shootin' at that same, but his shot went wild an' through the window tuh git his wife."

"So," said Penny softly, "that's the story he's going to tell."

"He's told it an' Bryant's told it, an' I reckon it'll stand. Hain't no way tuh prove otherwise."

"No," responded the girl, her confidence in Uncle Bryant severely threatened, "there's no way to prove otherwise."

"I saved some chow fer yuh," Gimlet said in an incidental way, "if yuh want it. I reckon yore hungry."

Penelope shook her head. "I'm not hungry, Gimlet."

"I dunno what's goin' tuh happen," the old man said sadly. "I do know one thing though, an' that's jest this. Becky wasn't kilt by no accident, an' if Bryant says she was he's as big a liar as Mort."

Penny looked at Gimlet. She laid one hand on his skinny forearm below the rolled-back shirtsleeve. Softly she said, "Gimlet, have you any idea why Rebecca was shot?"

Gimlet dropped the gaze of his one eye to the floor and shifted his weight uneasily from one foot to the other.

"Tell me," said Penny. "I want to know."

Gimlet nodded slowly. "I know," he said. "That's what made me afeared fer you." He stopped there, and Penny said:

"Go on."

Gimlet drew a deep breath as if, in telling the girl what he knew, he were leaping into a bottomless pit filled with icy water.

"I—I'm the one that got her kilt."

Penny waited, knowing that when he enlarged on the amazing statement it would be vastly modified.

"I couldn't o' helped it, though. I dunno where Becky learned that a pack o' killers from all parts o' the state was bein' brought tuh jobs here, so's they c'd hide while they stole hosses an' cattle from outside the Basin. She knowed it though, an' sent me with a note intuh Captain Blythe in Red Oak. I gave him the note an' left, like she tol' me tuh do. I dunno how the crooks here learned about it, but they sure was ready when the Texas Rangers rid through the Gap. They wiped 'em out aplenty."

"But there'll be other Rangers coming to see what happened to them," said Penny.

"An' alibis an' lies aplenty waitin' fer them same. By the time the next Rangers git here, there won't be a thing fer 'em tuh see. The stolen cattle'll have new brands an' the crooks that's hidin' here will be hidin' where they cain't be found. No one'll know nothin' about nothin'."

Penny nodded slowly, realizing the truth in what old Gimlet said.

"If it's knowed by the crooks that you know what's goin' on, they'll do tuh you the same as they done tuh Becky. As fer me, I'm expectin' tuh git kilt most any time."

"You said there wasn't anything you could put your finger on, Gimlet. It seems to me you know just about all there is to know."

"Can't prove nothin' though; 'sides that, I dunno where Bryant stands."

"I wish I knew that," said Penny thoughtfully.

"One thing's sure. As long as he's here, there won't no harm come tuh you. Let him git killed though, as I know well he's expectin', an' who knows what'll happen. 'Nuther thing I dunno is who is bossin' things!"

"Vince?"

Gimlet shook his head. "Too cussed fer any man tuh take orders from."

"Mort?"

Again the old man's head moved slowly from one side to the other. "I don't think so. We c'n figger Jeb an' Wallie out as a matter o' course. Maybe they know what's goin' on, maybe they don't. Jeb ain't the brains of a jackass an' Wallie ain't hardly ever home."

"Has he returned from town?"

"Nope. He left tuh tomcat around some more an' maybe find a woman tuh raise Becky's kids. He ain't come back yet."

"Where have the other men gone?"

"They moseyed out soon after the buryin'. I dunno where they went. Vince an' some o' them are in the front room o' the house."

"Who is with Vince?"

"Sawtell an' Lombard an' the man that talked with Bryant t'other night—Lonergan. They been chewin' the rag in there ever since Bryant took Mort away."

Gimlet turned to the huge stove and shoved a pan back from the heat. "Yuh sure yuh won't eat?" he asked.

Penny felt that food would choke her. She wondered if there were anyone in the world to whom she might turn in confidence and trust.

The door swung open suddenly, and Yuma stood in the opening. The big blond cowboy's face was grim. He glanced at Gimlet, then the girl.

"Saw yer hoss in the corral," he explained. "I got tuh ask yuh jest one thing, Miss Penny."

Penny nodded without speaking. She noticed that Yuma wore two guns, both tied low. His hat was well down on his forehead and he had a leather jacket over his shirt. He seemed to be dressed for a considerable ride. "Jest one thing," he repeated ponderously.

"Well, what is it?"

"I'm fixin' tuh pull stakes," the cowboy said. "Yuh don't know me very well, an' yuh got no reason tuh trust me exceptin' that I tell yuh I'm on the level. I know what I'm sayin' will sound crazy loco an' yuh won't pay no attention tuh it, but I'm wantin' tuh take you intuh Red Oak an' see yuh outen this Hellish Basin. They's folks there that'd make yuh right tuh home. You c'd teach school if yuh wanted tuh. Will you leave right now?"

"Of course not!" retorted Penny.

Yuma nodded slowly. "That's what I figgered. I'll be there, though, if ever yuh need me."

Penny could never know how Yuma had steeled himself to make the extravagant suggestion. The cowboy knew there wasn't a one-in-a-thousand chance that Penny would agree, and when he saw the scornful look, he had no more to say, no argument to put forth. He had made his request and it had been turned down. His simple and straightforward way of thinking hadn't grasped the thing in the same way that Penny did. He knew the girl was in a dangerous place and wanted to take her from it, make her safe. She refused to go. That was all there was to it.

The door closed, and Penny was about to voice her indignation, but Gimlet spoke first.

The old man said, more soberly than he'd spoken before, "Miss Penny, yuh should o' gone."

"Why, the nerve of that crazy cowboy! I don't even know his name. He's been here only a short time; he's fought twice with Uncle Bryant, and told me what he thought of the only man in the world I ever cared for, my uncle. And now he expects me to leave home and go off to Red Oak teaching school! Leave here tonight! With him! It's the most ridiculous outlandish nonsense I—"

Penny stopped for breath.

Gimlet said again, "Yuh should o' gone."

"I should, huh!" retorted Penny. "I'd have to be gagged and hog-tied to go with that crazy wrangler, and even then I'd fight every inch of the way." She turned abruptly and pushed through the door into the living quarters of the house.

Gimlet blinked when the door slammed, almost in his face. He fingered his mustache reflectively and *h'mmm'd* through his knobby nose. "Gagged an' hawg-tied, eh," he muttered. "Keeee-ripes, but mebbe that's a good idee." He hurried across the kitchen in a busybody sort of stride and followed Yuma into the darkness.

Penny hoped to get upstairs and to her bedroom without having to talk any further. Her mental state was in the lowest depth of despondency she'd ever known. It seemed that the more she learned the more futile it became to look ahead to happiness in Bryant's Basin. Her nerves felt drawn to a tension that threatened to snap them like catgut drawn too tightly on a violin. It seemed as if nothing that could happen now made a great deal of difference. She turned a corner of the hall and stopped. At the foot of the stairs stood Vince Cavendish.

At the sight of his cousin, Vince's shoulders seemed to droop, and his eyes assumed a woebegone expression that was something new. He advanced to the girl and said, "Who knows what's goin' tuh happen to us, Cousin."

Penny had never heard Vince speak in that sort of tone. She looked at him suspiciously, wondering what was behind the beaten manner that was like a plea for sympathy. She moved her hand behind her as Vince sought to take it in his own.

"What's the matter with you?" she demanded. "You act like a sick calf."

"Double-crossed," Vince said hollowly. "Double-crossed by Uncle Bryant. He's sold the lot of us out."

Penny recalled some of the things Gimlet had told her. "How?" she asked.

"I already signed," said Vince. "The men 're upstairs now, gettin' Jeb's name on the paper, an' they'll get yours when they come down."

"My name to what paper?"

"One that Bryant had drawed up," went on Vince in a melancholy voice. "We gotta sign away any claim we might have on the ranch as his heirs. He wants tuh leave it all tuh someone else."

"Who?"

Vince shook his head. "Dunno."

"Why didn't Uncle Bryant tell us to sign the agreement, or whatever it is?"

"Left it tuh some o' the men tuh handle. He's gone in tuh Red Oak with Mort. Reckon they're waitin' there fer the boys tuh git the paper signed an' bring it tuh them there."

"I'll not sign a thing until I talk to him," said Penny flatly, "and in the meantime, I'm going to bed."

Vince shook his head slowly. "Yuh can't."

"Who's going to stop me?"

"Sawtell an' Lombard an' Lonergan will be done with Jeb in a few minutes. They'll see that you sign somehow."

Penny turned to go upstairs, but Sawtell's stocky figure appeared at the top of the flight. His voice was soft and smooth to match the bland expression of his wide face.

"Miss Cavendish," he said as he started down the stairs, "I'm glad you're back. We've something to talk about."

"You've nothing to talk about with me," the girl said to the descending man. "Any business you have for Uncle Bryant can wait until he gets back here."

Sawtell smiled. "I guess you don't understand. He won't be back here until we take some documents to him with your name and the names of your cousins signed to them." He halted at the bottom of the flight, and took a folded paper, covered with close writing, from his pocket. "Shall we go into the other room?" he said.

"You can do what you want, I'm going to bed," retorted the girl, starting once more.

Sawtell gripped her arm.

"Let go of me!"

"I don't want to use any harsh methods, Miss Cavendish," Sawtell said with his smile gone, and an impatient edge to his voice. "But I promise you, you're going to sign the agreement so we can start for town as soon as possible."

Penny jerked her arm free. She felt panicky, helpless, but dared not show it. Her gun was still on the belt about her waist, but the cartridges it had held were somewhere in the brush on Thunder Mountain. She was determined to get to her room, bar the door, and stay there until her uncle came home. No matter what Bryant did, she knew that he would let nothing serious happen to her. It was incredible that he'd left instructions, such as Vince had told her about, with men like Sawtell and Lombard. She wondered about Lombard

and Lonergan. Gimlet had said they were here in the house. Upstairs? It was quite possible.

The girl looked toward the front door, then at Sawtell.

"There's no use putting us all to a lot of extra trouble," Sawtell told her. "You'll only make it harder for yourself."

"He's right," put in Vince, in a resigned voice. "They ain't no use puttin' off the signin' o' that paper. Might as well do it an' git it done with."

Penny's jaw was firm. "I won't do anything until I talk to Uncle Bryant."

Sawtell nodded slowly. "All right then, we'll have to bring Jeb down here." He called curt orders up the stairs, and in a moment Jeb, struggling between Lonergan and Lombard, was practically carried down the stairs. His eyes were wide and staring, and his lean face white with terror.

"Do what they want," he cried to the girl. "No matter what it is, you sign it like what I done. If yuh don't they'll brand me with a poker."

"Take him to the fireplace," ordered Sawtell, "put some ropes around him, then come back for Vince. This girl will do what Bryant says, or she'll see slow murder, with a lot of pain."

"No, no," cried Vince, "not me!"

As if by magic a gun appeared in Sawtell's hand.

"*You*," he said, "as well as Jeb."

Penny watched the wide-eyed Jeb and the cringing, wincing Vince being dragged, howling, to the fireplace, where Lombard and Lonergan tossed ropes about them. The two were jerked off their feet and stretched on the floor, and more ropes looped about their ankles made them helpless. Sawtell, gun still in hand, watched the procedure, unmoved and expressionless. Lonergan's black eyes reflected the leaping flames when he faced Sawtell. His black mustache, so carefully brushed and tapered, seemed to twitch with his eagerness to make the next move.

Sawtell nodded, and the former gambler grabbed the poker in lean fingers and shoved it deep among the red-hot coals. Stark terror from their souls showed in the eyes of the captured men. Vince drooled supplications for mercy, begging Penny to sign Bryant's agreement and save him from the torture of the heated iron. Jeb wailed conglomerate quotations, misquoted, from the Scriptures. Sawtell approached Penelope. "You have a few minutes to think it over," he said, "while the iron gets red-hot. Have you ever heard a man scream with the pain of being branded"—he paused, lowered his voice, and added "—in the eyes?"

CHAPTER XVI - ONE-EYE SEES DEATH

The Lone Ranger stood close to his horse at the edge of the Basin where thick foliage marked the beginning of the rise of Thunder Mountain. He strained his eyes and ears to detect what he could in the Basin.

Motionless and tense, the masked man waited like a hunter that tried to catch a scent from a wind that held its breath. He heard the usual night sounds of cattle, katydids, and frogs. There was an occasional call from a creature of the forest that rose behind him. Nothing more.

On the downward path, the masked man had met no one. He had dismounted on several occasions to examine the trail by matchlight, and near the bottom, where it was overgrown with weeds, he had lighted a candle to inspect it further. He found that many head of cattle had traveled where the path was smooth, but the beef had been fanned out in many directions near the bottom of the mountain and driven into the Basin at several points. He decided that this had been done so that a path would not be seen from the Basin itself.

The Lone Ranger guided Silver back among the trees where the white coat wouldn't be so obvious if someone rode near. He whispered softly, then left the horse untethered.

He paused to make sure that his mask was snugly in place. It had become so much a part of him that he couldn't be sure of its presence unless he felt it with his hand. When Tonto had, at first, suggested wearing the mask all the

time, he had thought it a bit dramatic, perhaps even silly, but consideration made him realize that he already was hampered by the determination not to shoot to kill, by great odds, and by the weakness of his wounds and recent fever. He might have to fight, to rope and shoot, and the mask must be no handicap. He checked his guns, making sure that they were fully loaded by replacing the shell that had been used to disarm Rangoon. Then he was ready.

An experienced black cat stalking a nervous bird could be no more quiet than was the Lone Ranger as he moved across the Basin. His clothing had no flapping superfluities; he wore no jingling spurs; his guns were tied down so that the holsters could not slap his legs. Boots oiled to preclude the slightest possibility of any squeaking leather, he moved swiftly and surely toward the buildings of the ranch. He saw the house and, not far from it, the row of lighted squares that marked the bunkhouse.

Halfway to the buildings, the Lone Ranger froze. He wondered if his eyes were playing tricks, or if he actually had seen someone, or something, move at one end of the bunkhouse. Now he saw a moving figure in the beam of light that slanted from a rear window. In an instant, whatever he saw was obscured by the darkness. He glanced over his shoulder. Silver was well out of sight. His own dark clothing would be barely visible unless someone were quite close to him.

Then he heard the sound of hoofs. A horse and rider appeared as a vague shadow against the lighted bunkhouse windows. The masked man dropped flat on his stomach, hugging the ground as closely as possible. The rider was coming straight toward him.

He drew a pistol, holding it in readiness if he should be seen. He knew that his hat was light, and might attract attention, but he dared not move it. He felt the ground tremble with the beat of hoofs. He heard the crack of a quirt, cruelly applied, and a man's husky voice. Now the rider was almost upon him, without slackening his speed.

The racing horse looked tremendous as it passed within twenty feet of the Lone Ranger. It was impossible to tell who was in the saddle. All details were shrouded by the darkness, but whoever that horseman was, he was in a hurry. He swept across the Basin toward the foot of Thunder Mountain, and the last the masked man saw was the barely perceptible shadow breaking through the underbrush that hid the uphill trail.

The Lone Ranger presently rose to his feet, waited several seconds, and then moved ahead again. This time his destination was the bunkhouse. He could call on Bryant and Penelope later. First, he would investigate to learn, if possible, the reason for the unknown rider's sudden departure.

There was no sound from within the bunkhouse. The masked man advanced toward the side of the long and rather narrow one-story building. The rear, from which the unknown rider had started, was on his right, the front of the building on his left. He could see that a door which opened out was wide, but from his point of view the Lone Ranger couldn't see the inside of the place.

He could hear something going on inside the ranch house, a couple of hundred feet away, but couldn't distinguish the sounds clearly enough to know what they might mean. "Go there," he muttered, "later on."

With increasing caution, he approached the objective until his back was pressed close to the slab side of the bunkhouse at the corner between the lighted windows and the open door. Still there was no sound inside. His gun in readiness, he rounded the corner and looked in the door. He saw a well-lighted room. Double-deck bunks lined each of the side walls, divided by a narrow aisle. In the front part of the room there was one large table, and several chairs. At least twenty men slept here, but now there was no one in sight.

The table had held a poker game which seemed to have been interrupted suddenly. Freshly dealt cards lay face down on the table as they had fallen, before the chairs of the players. The room was littered with battered pictures, extra boots, blanket rolls, and other paraphernalia that would naturally be accumulated by those who slept there. The Lone Ranger stepped inside and drew the door shut behind him.

At the poker table he paused and examined a few of the cards. Riffling through them he came across two aces. He held these cards close to a coal-oil lamp and studied their backs. In one corner, he found a barely discernible indentation that might have been made by a fingernail. He nodded slowly.

"Looks like it might be Slick Lonergan," he mused. Slick hadn't been seen in any of his familiar haunts since the time he had disappeared before a trial in which he was to be questioned about a murder. The Lone Ranger knew Lonergan's entire background; a crooked gambler, a crafty lawyer, and a shrewd schemer, who should have been jailed long ago, but who had repeatedly found loopholes that served as ratholes for him to slip through and remain free.

Leaving the table, the Lone Ranger began a quick but systematic search of the building. He moved down the aisle, studying the possessions near each bunk. He found a handbill that had Rangoon's picture on it, but the name at the time of its printing was Abe Larkin. Larkin apparently hadn't taken any pains to hide the fact that he was wanted by the law.

Once he thought he heard a faint, low moan from somewhere close at hand. He stood attentive, but the sound was not repeated. He continued in his search, oppressed by a somewhat guilty feeling as a prowler and an unexplainable sensation that there was someone else in the bunkhouse with him.

He studied two more bunks and then heard the moan again. This time it was unmistakable. The Lone Ranger hurried to the far end of the bunkhouse, and there, in the lower bunk on his right, he found a man unconscious.

The window over the head of the still form was open. It was outside this window that the unknown rider had been first seen.

The unconscious man—the Lone Ranger could see in the dim light that he was old—was shadowed by the shelf-like bunk of the second tier. The Lone Ranger unhooked a lamp that swung from the ceiling and placed it so that the light fell across the bald head, which lay in a widening pool of red. He jerked his bandanna from a pocket and soused it in a near-by water pitcher; then he bathed the old fellow's face. A tremulous soft sob broke through the white mustache. The eyes of the wounded man fluttered slightly, then stared up. There was an empty socket where the left eye should have been, but the other eye was bright with pain.

"Take it easy," the Lone Ranger whispered. "I'm going to have a look at that wound and see what we can do for you. Don't try to speak just yet—wait a little."

He turned the old man gently to his side and saw the handle of a knife protruding from high up on one shoulder. The blade was out of sight. He didn't touch the knife—there was no use. The wound was fatal; Gimlet at best had only a few minutes.

He applied more water to the old man's face and forehead. "Tell me, if you can, who did this?" he said.

Gimlet's lips moved feebly, but no words came.

"Do you know who stabbed you?" asked the Lone Ranger. "One word, just the name of the man, can you tell me that?"

Gimlet lifted one hand very feebly, and pointed toward the open window.

The Lone Ranger nodded. "I know, he stabbed you through that window. Tell me who it was."

The dying man seemed to be gathering himself for one supreme effort. He swallowed hard; his eyelids closed, then opened.

"Tried," he said, then coughed and started again. "I—I tried tuh—get Yuma—His bunk here—" More coughing choked the words. Blood drooled from the side of the old man's mouth and stained his white mustache. The Lone Ranger pressed water from his handkerchief against Gimlet's lips.

"I heard you," he said softly, "I heard what you said. You tried to get Yuma. Yuma is a man who works here?"

Gimlet nodded.

"You said this was his bunk?"

Again the slowly moving head went down and up.

"Tell me some more. What about Yuma?"

"Felt o' his bunk ... lookin' tuh see...." Gimlet had to pause for a fit of coughing so violent that it hardly seemed his fast-ebbing strength could stand it. When he finished, his breath came in short and painful gasps. "The ... the house," he managed to say. He struggled hard, fighting the Grim Specter every step of its advancing way. There was more he wanted desperately to tell.

The old man was upon that borderline between the living and the dead. From his position, he seemed to see things in their true light. He looked beyond the mask and saw a man he knew could be trusted. His gnarled, blue-veined hand clutched that of the Lone Ranger while he fought hard to make a last statement. The masked man leaned close to him, to catch the dying words if they were uttered. But whatever Gimlet was about to say went with him across the last threshold. His hand clutched convulsively and then relaxed. He coughed once, and brought a flood of his life's blood to his mouth, and then lay back.

The masked man felt and found no pulse. He closed the old man's fingers and laid them across the bony chest.

"Yuma," he muttered. "This was Yuma's bunk. I wonder who Yuma is and where I'll find him?"

His thoughts came to a lurching halt when a sharp voice snarled a curse with cataclysmic violence.

"Yuh murderin' skunk, I'll kill yuh fer this!" It was Yuma who shouted from the doorway.

CHAPTER XVII - PENELOPE SIGNS HER NAME

Yuma swept the poker table aside and sent it clattering and crashing against the wall. The Lone Ranger had no chance to deny the accusation the man from Arizona hurled. Anything he said would have fallen on unhearing ears. Yuma ignored his guns and, lowering his head, charged like an infuriated bull, sweeping down the aisle between the bunks and gathering power and speed as he advanced.

The masked man had no chance to dodge, no place to dodge to. He was trapped between the bunks on each side of the narrow space down which the cowboy rushed. His gun half-drawn, he dropped it back in leather. Nothing but a death slug would stop Yuma. He was blind to any threat of shooting. Then Yuma struck with the force of a battering ram. The Lone Ranger staggered back from the terrific impact of the heavy shoulder flush against his chest. Intense pain stabbed his own bandaged shoulder, and brilliant lights seemed to dance before his eyes. He barely saw the huge, balled fist that Yuma swung to follow up his charge. Almost without thought, the Lone Ranger turned his head quickly to roll it with the punch and take a glancing blow instead of one that might have smashed his jaw. He fell back several paces, fighting to stay on his feet until his reeling senses could function coherently.

Yuma's face was livid. He swung again, bringing his left up almost from the floor, but this time the masked man dodged the blow, then set himself for defense. He could barely move his left arm. He thought the wound must have been reopened by the awful onslaught. Yuma was reaching out with both

hands, trying to wrap his heavy arms around the lithe Lone Ranger and crush him to the floor. The space was far too limited for such maneuvering, so the masked man let his knees collapse and dropped like a plummet while the adversary clutched at empty air. Then the Lone Ranger shot up from his crouch as if his legs were coiled steel springs. He brought his right fist up with the full whipcorded strength of his good arm, augmented by the muscles of the legs. His aim was perfect and his timing likewise. He felt his hard fist crash against the point of Yuma's chin and saw the cowboy's head snap back. Pain and fury made Yuma careless and too eager. While still off balance from the blow that hurt, he tried to swing a roundhouse left. The Lone Ranger stepped inside the arc of that tremendous swing and jabbed another right to Yuma's nose, then chopped a hard blow to the unprotected jaw.

Yuma, it appeared, could take terrific punishment. Those blows of the Lone Ranger were short, but they were hard. Strong men had often dropped before those jabs, but Yuma kept on fighting. His fists swung wildly while he kept up a continual string of cursing threats. The Lone Ranger's strength was nearly gone. He admired the ability of Yuma to stand up beneath his rain of rights. He dared not use his left and tear that shoulder wound still further.

"How long," he wondered, "in the name of Mercy, how long can he keep this up?" He knew that any one of the wild blows, if it landed true, would knock him out. Then his campaign would end before it got well started. Again, and still again, he drove his right fist flush against the big man's face. Blood streamed from Yuma's nose, and a cut was opened over his right eye. He gave ground now, backing toward the door of the bunkhouse, while the Lone Ranger advanced. How long it might have gone on is hard to say, but Yuma backed against the upturned table, lost his balance, and went over backward. His head smacked hard against the floor. For an instant Yuma tried to rise; though totally unconscious, his stout fighter's heart fighting on. Then his eyes rolled up and he went limp.

Breathing hard, almost gasping, the Lone Ranger crouched beside his fallen enemy. He found that Yuma, though bumped hard, was probably not seriously injured. He opened the door and sucked deep, satisfying drinks of the cool night air until his breathing was more nearly normal and his throbbing head stopped spinning. Then he turned once more to the unconscious man.

"What a fighter," he thought admiringly. "What a man!" But he must not linger here too long. There was still the all-important business at the ranch house. He saw a horse standing just outside the bunkhouse. There was a blanket roll strapped behind the saddle, and saddlebags that bulged. He glanced toward the ranch house, but saw no sign that anyone had heard the fight.

"Even if this isn't that man's horse," he decided, "it will have to do for the time being."

He dragged the heavy form of the unconscious man to the side of the horse and then, sparing his throbbing left arm as much as possible, hoisted Yuma across the saddle in a highly uncomfortable position. Yuma's head, shoulders, and arms drooped on one side, as the cowboy's belly rested on the saddle and his legs balanced him on the other side. The masked man used Yuma's own rope to tie him securely in place. The man was going to prove something of a problem, but the Lone Ranger wanted to keep him to question him at length when he recovered consciousness. Already the masked man had been widely side-tracked in his plan to call on Bryant and Penny for a conference, but one of the qualities that contributed to his later greatness was his ability to revise his plans continually to suit changing conditions, or to reject plans altogether and replace them by new ones. He wanted Silver near him now, but the stallion was far across the level stretch, concealed at the foot of the mountain.

"If anyone had been near enough to hear," he thought, "the sound of that fight would certainly have brought them. I'll take a chance."

He whistled sharply, and heard a responsive whinny come back to him from the darkness. He stood tense and guarded, waiting for anything his whistle might have brought, but no one came. Pounding hoofs, however, announced the approach of Silver as the stallion beat across the grass. Still no sign of any other presence. The Lone Ranger didn't know, then, that the solid timber walls of the big rambling house where Penny and her cousins were faced by Sawtell and his men were practically soundproof. The quality that made it impossible for the masked man's whistle or the noise of the fight to be heard inside the house likewise muffled the sounds in the house, so that the masked man didn't hear the pleas and cries of Vince and Jeb Cavendish.

Leading Yuma's horse with its unconscious burden, the Lone Ranger moved away from the lighted bunkhouse and met Silver in the darkness. He fumbled in a pocket for a pencil, then scribbled a hurried message on paper from a saddlebag and tied it to the pommel of his saddle.

He knew that some hard rider had already gone up the Thunder Mountain trail. If it were in the cards for someone to find, talk with, and perhaps release Rangoon, this would have already transpired, and Tonto's mission would be finished.

"Now," he said softly to Silver, "go find Tonto."

He slapped the white horse firmly, repeating the name "Tonto." Silver tossed his head and rushed away.

The masked man made another quick examination of his prisoner. He found him still unconscious, but the pulse was steady, and the breathing normal. Assured that nothing was seriously wrong, he led the loaded horse to the ranch house, walked to one side of the building, and tossed the reins about a post. Then, on soundless feet, he stepped upon the porch. He felt in his

pocket and found the silver bullet Penelope had refused. It served to remind him that he owed the girl a debt that would be hard to repay.

He must, he decided, catch Bryant by surprise before the old man could shout for help; must speak quickly, reassure the man and make him listen to the purpose of the call. He opened the outer door without a sound, and then heard Penny's voice.

The girl sat between Lonergan and Lombard at a round table near the fireplace. Sawtell was in another chair a little distant, keeping one eye on a red-hot poker in the coals, the other on two bound men on the floor. Vince was whimpering like a beaten cur, while Penny looked at him with disgust evident in her face.

"I won't never ferget this, Cousin Penny, honest I won't," said Vince. "As sure as yer savin' us from havin' our eyes burned out with that poker."

"I haven't signed this agreement yet," the girl replied.

"But yuh will, you've got tuh, yuh know blamed well that Uncle Bryant is waitin' fer Sawtell tuh take it to him in Red Oak. Hurry up an' sign it."

Lonergan dipped a pen in a bottle of ink and held it toward the girl.

"Here you are," he said suavely, as he pointed to a line at the bottom of a long page of close writing. "Sign right there beneath the others and then we'll sign as witnesses."

Penelope took the pen and tapped the un-inked end meditatively against her small, even teeth.

"Just let me get everything straight," she said. "In the first place, if Uncle Bryant doesn't want to leave his property to us, he doesn't need to. He can make a will, can't he?"

Lonergan nodded and glanced at Sawtell.

"Tell her," the bland-faced man suggested.

Lonergan went into a lengthy discourse on the legality of wills that left estates to others than the blood relations, and told how there had been times in courts of law when those wills had been contested.

"Bryant's one desire," he went on, "is to leave his outfit to someone and have no question about the will being valid. He wants all four nephews and you to sign to the effect that you relinquish all claims whatsoever to the Basin property for a consideration not described." Lonergan didn't make it as simple as he might have done. He seemed to gloat in the opportunity to air his knowledge of legal phrases and quote from his experiences as a lawyer in the East.

"Doesn't it," asked Penny, "make some difference when the signature is secured by threat of torture?"

Lonergan smiled, "Of course."

"If I don't sign you'll use that red-hot iron on Vince and Jeb."

"That would be hard to prove," suggested Lonergan.

Sawtell broke in impatiently.

"Hurry up and sign—we can't wait all night."

"One thing more," said Penny. "What about Wallie, and Mort?"

"Bryant'll get their names signed when we take that paper to town."

Penny still hesitated. She knew everything was topsy-turvy. There were lies and liars on every side; no one could be trusted. She wondered why all the cries hadn't brought old Gimlet from the kitchen. She almost wished that she had left when Yuma wanted her to go with him.

"Look," said Penny suddenly. "I've been listening to what you've said. Now suppose you listen to me for just a minute. I'm going to sign this paper, simply because it won't make a particle of difference to me. If anything happened to Uncle Bryant, I'd want no part of this ranch as long as the place is infested with vermin."

Lonergan showed resentment at this statement, and leaned forward to speak, but a glance at Sawtell changed his mind. The smooth-faced killer held up a silencing hand. Lonergan relaxed.

Penelope looked at Vince.

"You," she said hotly, "turn my stomach! I know very well that you and Mort have been scheming all along. You helped Rangoon kill those Texas Rangers. You're as much to blame for Becky's murder as Mort. You told him he had to shut her up."

Vince looked wide-eyed at his cousin as she went on.

"You're nothing but a little squirt without spunk enough to even *look* like a man, let alone *act* like one. You've been whimpering like a whipped cur, trying to arouse a lot of sympathy with your crocodile tears. Well, I knew all along that you were faking. Now don't you feel like a jackass?"

As Penelope warmed to the subject, all the bitterness of the past weeks found outlet in her lashing words.

"Maybe this is Uncle Bryant's desire. If so, it's all right with me, but I'm going to find out what's possessed him to turn on me. If it *isn't* his idea, *I'll find that out, too*."

She turned toward Jeb. "As for you, I'm sorry for you. You're a worthless dreamer. You might have been an artist or a writer or a poet, if you hadn't been too lazy to get some education. As it is you're not worth a plugged dime to anyone, least of all to these crooks. As soon as they're satisfied that you can't help them, they'll kill you." Jeb squirmed uneasily in his ropes. "You're *little* men, both of you, and so are your brothers."

The girl jabbed the pen into the ink and rapidly signed her name to the paper.

"You can have your paper all signed as you want it," she said, almost trembling with the white heat of her rage. "Take it to Bryant, if that's what you're going to do, and tell him that as long as those kids are upstairs, without anyone to take care of them, a six-in-hand can't drag me from here, and as soon as Wallie brings that woman he promised to, there isn't any power on earth can *keep* me here."

She thrust the paper, signed, toward Sawtell. "Here you are, and have fun while you can, because pretty soon someone is going to ask a lot of questions about six murdered Texas Rangers."

"I'll take that," a new voice said. All eyes turned toward the door. A tall man with lean hips and broad shoulders stood there; a man whose hat was white, whose face was masked.

"Who are you?" barked Lonergan. The masked man stepped forward, reaching for the paper.

"You'll be dead before me—" started Lombard, as he rose from his chair. A gun appeared as if by magic in the tall masked man's right hand. Lombard fell back before the weapon's threat.

"Who is he?" "Whar'd he come from?" "How'd he git here?"

There was a chorus of amazed exclamations. There were threats: "Yuh won't git away with this"; "Yuh better drop them guns afore we git mad"; "You won't leave this Basin alive." But no one made a move of aggression. The Lone Ranger glanced quickly at the document, folded it, and tucked it in the pocket of his shirt while his gun remained steady, covering the room at large.

"I gathered from what I heard that Bryant Cavendish has gone to Red Oak," he said. "If this paper is for him, none of you need worry, because I'll take it to him." The expression on Penelope's flushed face was a mixture of admiration and resentment. She stared at the intruder, liking him instinctively in spite of herself. She couldn't understand his part in the grim drama that seemed to be unfolding on a circular stage while she stood in the center.

CHAPTER XVIII - A GAMBLER TALKS

The masked man studied Vince and then the others in turn. He could feel the electric tension in the room. The killers were motionless and silent, returning his gaze with crafty eyes, watching for the slightest relaxation that would give them the split second required to drop a hand and fire from the hip. The Lone Ranger knew this type, and didn't underestimate them. They were expert gunmen who would kill without compunction. When he spoke, his voice was low, but every word was sharp and distinct.

"It's something of a surprise to learn that three men who are wanted so badly by the law have stayed close by. You might have done better to have gotten out of Texas."

None of the men replied. Penelope watched the masked man as if hypnotized. Twice now he had arrived at a crisis. In spite of herself, she found that she was trusting him.

"Of course, you felt secure here," the Lone Ranger went on. "You knew that Thunder Mountain would make a fine hideout in case any law men managed to get through the Gap. You cleared out a trail and a campsite, and then concealed it. You felt pretty safe, or you wouldn't have stayed here."

"Won't yuh cut us loose?" pleaded Vince.

"Where are the rest of the men who work here?" asked the masked man.

"They went tuh town," said Vince, "right after the buryin'. They made a sort o' holiday of it. They'll be comin' back."

The masked man turned slightly toward Penny, still however watching the others. He would ask later about the burial.

"How many of those other men are wanted by the law?"

"I don't know. I don't know but the whole pack of them are crooked. They must be. If they weren't, they'd get out, like Yuma did."

"Yuma?"

"He tried to persuade me to leave here. I wish to Heaven I could have. I thought I could depend on Uncle Bryant, but now—" Penny broke off in doubt.

The Lone Ranger, realizing that the girl could add a great deal to his understanding of events, pressed her for more details.

"There's time to talk later," she said.

"Talk now. Tell me more about this man, Yuma."

Penny explained how she had trusted her uncle in spite of all that had been said, how she had tried to account for his unconcern in the face of events, by thinking that his eyes must be failing. Yuma, she explained, had tried to tell her that she was mistaken in her trust. Yuma had been fired at by Bryant; had fought with him, and finally had left the Basin. She explained that it was Bryant's belief in Mort's thin alibi for murdering Rebecca that had finally showed her her mistake, and now the clincher was the paper Bryant had left for her to sign.

The Lone Ranger broke in from time to time with questions that brought out the story of Rebecca and the children upstairs. Penny told him that she felt compelled to remain for the sake of the children until Wallie returned. Gimlet, she said, was too old to take the responsibility.

"So you believe in Yuma?"

Penny nodded, her eyes bright with unshed tears.

"I—I must."

"The last time we met," the masked man said, "I offered you something that you refused. I'm going to offer it again, and what I said then still goes." He reached one hand into a pocket, then dropped a silver bullet on the table. The men looked at it curiously. Penny glanced at it, then at the steady, level eyes behind the mask. For a time she said nothing. Then, "It means a lot to you to find out who killed those Texas Rangers, doesn't it?"

The Lone Ranger nodded. "Please," he said, "pick up that bullet. You might need it. Remember what I told you to do with it. You mentioned an old man named Gimlet."

"Yes?"

"Gimlet is dead."

The announcement was an obvious surprise to everyone. And to Penny it was much more. It was a severe shock.

"He was stabbed," the masked man explained. "I was with him when he died in the bunkhouse."

"But what was he doing there? He slept in the house here."

"I don't know why he went to the bunkhouse, but that's where I found him. He gave me the name of the man."

"*Who?*"

The Lone Ranger spoke slowly. "He named a fellow you mentioned a few minutes ago. He said, 'Yuma.'"

"I don't believe it!" declared Penny hotly. "Yuma was Gimlet's friend. Yuma was my friend too. He tried to reason with Uncle Bryant, and when he couldn't he left here. Oh, no, no, no! Yuma wouldn't murder anyone, least of all old Gimlet." Penny picked up the silver bullet and clutched it in her tiny fist. "There must be a mistake," she sobbed.

"If Yuma didn't kill him," said the Lone Ranger, "we'll soon know who did. In the meantime, I'll take this paper to Bryant to see what he has to say about it."

Lonergan, the gambler-lawyer, spoke.

"D'you mind," he drawled in a cocksure manner, "if I have a few words to say?"

"Well?"

"It strikes me, stranger, that you're in a spot right now, and you don't know just what to do about it. You're like the gent that had a wildcat by the tail and didn't dare let go."

"Go on," snapped the masked man.

Lonergan's lean fingers, resting on the table, beat a soft rhythm. He spoke with an assurance that was annoying, to say the least.

"You've ravaged the privacy of this ranch and illegally entered a private home without permission. You've flaunted that gun in our faces and asked a lot of

questions. You've stolen a legal form that isn't yours by any stretch of the imagination. In fact, it's none of your business what goes on here."

"Any more to say, Lonergan?"

"Plenty. You can't stay here from now on. You don't know when the rest of the men will come back and make it hot for you. You can't prove any of the charges you've made or hinted at, or anything that the girl has said. Besides, I don't expect the law would listen to you while you're wearin' that mask. You'd like to turn us all over to the law and collect some rewards, but that'd be downright hard to handle because there's quite a few of us here and you'd have to take us through the Gap and run the risk of meeting our friends. You can't very well take the girl and the four youngsters away with you for the same reason. You leave here alone, and we'll simply make out another form like the one you've stuck in your pocket and have the signatures made all over again. When you leave, there's a good chance that one of us will drill you."

Penny thought she saw uneasiness in the masked man. She glanced from him to Lonergan while she too wondered what could be done. She wanted nothing less than to be left there with those killers, especially after what she had heard about Gimlet and Yuma. Now there would be no one to witness whatever might transpire.

"Have you," asked the masked man, "any propositions?"

Penny saw the wink that Lonergan showed Sawtell; she wondered if the masked man saw it too.

"Maybe so," the gambler said. "You seem to know a lot about things here. Now just forget what you know, take off that mask, and let us see who you are, and then either join up with us or ride away and keep your mouth shut."

The tall stranger seemed to be considering. Penny wanted to scream out a warning that he would never be allowed to leave the place alive. He would be killed, no matter what his decision might be.

Lonergan went on.

"You must have brains enough to realize that you wouldn't be able to prove that any of us had a hand in murdering those Texas Rangers. Why, we could even prove we *didn't* do it, by the footprints of an Indian around the place where they've been buried."

So the graves had been found. The masked man added this minute detail to his stored-up knowledge.

"Anyone can see," went on Lonergan, "that they must have been ambushed by Indians. Maybe old Gimlet, who took a message in to town for Captain Blythe, had a hand in framing them for murder. Gimlet might have had an old grudge

he wanted to settle with Texas Rangers. He's been around here for a good many years, you know."

"I admit," the masked man said, "it would be pretty hard to prove who killed those men, but cattle-stealing is a different matter. Furthermore, the law wants you men for other things."

"As for *us*," Lonergan argued, "the law'd have to find us first. As for the cattle-stealing, when we sell cattle the brands are *right*. We haven't sold a head that hasn't had the Cavendish brand."

Penny felt the world fall still further apart when the man she had begun to trust said, "What if I join up with you?"

Lombard and Sawtell looked admiringly at Lonergan and more than ever appreciated his glib tongue.

"In that case, you'd split the proceeds like the rest of us."

"But what about the stolen cattle?"

Lonergan shook his head.

"Never can be traced here," he said. "We bring them down the mountain trail from the top of Thunder Mountain; we shove them in with older cows and run a new brand. We got a dozen brands recorded to work with. We keep the cattle here until the scar has healed to look old; meanwhile we take cattle from the last batch up the trail and sell them. We don't have no trouble at all."

Penelope could see Lonergan's purpose. He was a gambler and playing at his game. He told everything that would occupy time, knowing that at any minute some of the men would be returning from Red Oak. He was betting that the masked man could never use that information.

She saw the tall stranger apparently considering the offer to join the gang. Why, in the name of Heaven, couldn't this masked man realize what Lonergan was doing? Why didn't he come here with some concrete plan instead of bungling in to find himself so helpless, even though he held a gun on the others?

"You have a pretty well-greased machine for stealing cattle," the Lone Ranger said in admiration, "and as you say, it would be almost impossible for me to do much in fighting against you."

"That's right," agreed Lonergan. "Now put up that gun and take off the mask, an' we'll talk."

"But first tell me who I'm taking orders from."

"Sawtell."

The masked man shook his head.

"There's someone giving him orders; who is that?"

A crafty look came into Lonergan's cadaverous face.

"You mentioned his name a while ago." He glanced at Penny, and said, "Yuma."

Hoofs clattered close outside the house. Penny felt that now there surely would be a climax of events, and she was right. The masked man's manner changed abruptly. He listened for a moment as the hoofbeats stopped. A trace of a smile showed on his lips. His uncertainty gave way to grim and vigorous speech.

"You've wondered and asked," he snapped, "what I was going to do here. Now you'll find out."

Something about the transformation in the masked man made Penny want to shout. She felt that her trust in him had not been misplaced after all. The Lone Ranger shoved the table back, then kicked a hooked rug away from its place on the plank floor.

"This house has stood here a good many years," he said. "Before Bryant came here, it was used as a hiding place for army supplies when the Indians were bad. I've been told by a lot of old timers that there's a vault beneath this floor."

Penny knew about the vault. The trap door in the floor that led to it had been hidden by the carpet, but now it was exposed.

"That vault," continued the masked man, "was also used to hold prisoners when it wasn't convenient to move them. Well, it's going to be used to hold prisoners again."

Watching the men, still holding his gun on them, he threw back the trap door with a bang.

Lonergan's poker face was changed. Baffled fury showed in his black, snapping eyes. Lombard swore and Sawtell squinted grimly while his lips compressed to a thin line.

"Get down there," commanded the masked man. "All of you."

Lonergan went first, very slowly, dragging his steps until the masked man prodded him hard with his gun, after disarming him.

"You two can take those men you've tied up," the Lone Ranger told Sawtell and Lombard, as he drew their guns from the holsters and tossed them aside.

Despite their pleas, Vince and Jeb were hauled down the steep and rotting ladder to the damp windowless vault, walled in by stone, beneath the floor.

"At least untie us," cried Vince.

"Your pals can do that."

"It's unholy," cried Jeb. "Yuh can't put me with them killers. This ain't the will o' the Lord fer me tuh suffer sech company."

"At least," yelled Lombard from the depths, "give us a light down here."

The Lone Ranger dropped the door in place and bolted it.

"It'll be hard for them to open it from down below," he told Penelope, "but just to make sure they stay there for the time being, we'll brace it."

He moved the heavy table over the trap door, and on this piled a chair. Five-foot lengths of firewood were stacked near the fireplace, and one of these reached from the chair to the rafter of the room.

"If they want to push their way out of that," commented the masked man, "they'll have to push the roof off this house."

"But Yuma, I know he isn't—"

The Lone Ranger gripped the trembling hand of the girl firmly.

"Please don't jump to conclusions," he admonished her. "We're not going to take a thing for granted."

"But everything else they said was true. That *must* be what they've been doing to steal the cattle. The stock here haven't increased in numbers a great deal. Lonergan told the truth about everything else."

"We'll see."

"And that horse that came up. Someone has returned from Red Oak."

The masked man shook his head. "No one has come from Red Oak yet. That horse you heard was Silver. I sent him after my friend."

"Me come." Penny turned sharply and saw Tonto standing in the doorway.

The Indian looked troubled. "You come quick," he told the Lone Ranger. "There plenty trouble. Tonto tell you."

The man in the mask nodded quickly. "Remember that bullet," he told Penny. "Don't worry and take good care of those kids upstairs. You have plenty of loaded weapons here. If those men below make trouble, shoot a warning through the floor."

The Lone Ranger left the room and went outside with Tonto.

CHAPTER XIX - ANNOUNCEMENT EXTRAORDINARY

Tonto was visibly agitated by something that had happened while he lay hidden in the darkness near the clearing. The Lone Ranger glanced over his shoulder at Penelope, on guard in the house, then closed the door.

"Plenty happen," said Tonto.

The Lone Ranger interrupted, "Just a minute." He looked toward the bunkhouse, still brilliantly lighted, and then at his prisoner.

Yuma was regaining consciousness, and squirming about uneasily in his uncomfortable position.

"Could you hear what was said inside, Tonto?"

The Indian nodded, and once more started to speak.

"Before you tell me what happened in the clearing, let me tell you about a murder down here." The Lone Ranger hurriedly sketched the recent grim events, making no effort to soften his voice so that his prisoner couldn't hear. He didn't mention the document taken from Penny, but he did tell about locking the killers in the cellar.

"Now," he finished, "tell me, did that man who passed me find Rangoon?" Tonto said, "That right. Him come to clearing. Rangoon call. Him stop." The Lone Ranger noticed that Yuma had stopped squirming. He seemed to be listening intently to what the Indian said. Tonto explained how the unknown rider had dismounted and had talked for a few moments in an undertone to Rangoon. Their voices were too soft for the Indian to get the gist of the conversation, and he dared not move closer for fear of detection. The unknown

rider had then untethered Rangoon's horse. A moment later a shot was fired and hoofbeats signified the fast departure of both horses, one ridden by the killer, the other led. It had been too dark for Tonto to distinguish anything. He didn't even know which man had been shot until he struck matches and identified Rangoon. When Tonto finished his narration, Yuma broke in impatiently.

"Look here, stranger, how long d'yuh figger on leavin' me like this? My belly's fit tuh meet my spine." The masked man, with Tonto's help, untied the big prisoner, and slid him from his horse.

"You all right?" he asked.

"My head's achin' fit tuh split. What did yuh hit me with?"

"You tripped, and your head rapped the floor."

"Oh!" Yuma made no resistance as he was retied, his hands behind his back. He obediently climbed into his saddle when ordered to do so.

"Who," he asked, "are you?"

"If I wanted you to know, I'd take this mask off."

"Would I know yuh then?"

"I doubt it—I don't remember ever having seen you before tonight. Now listen to me, I'm letting you sit in the saddle so that you'll be more comfortable. I'm not going to gag you unless you start yelling. There are a few things I want to talk to you about, and you'll save yourself a lot of trouble if you'll answer my questions." While he spoke, the Lone Ranger connected Yuma's feet with a rope tied to each ankle and drawn beneath the belly of his horse.

"If you try to run away, I'll lasso you and you'll find yourself in a bad way, because you can't get out of the saddle."

"I ain't no fool," retorted Yuma in a sulky voice.

"Get going," said his captor.

Yuma heeled his horse obediently and started ahead. The Lone Ranger rode about ten feet behind, next to Tonto, whispering softly. Tonto frowned heavily at everything that was said, and tried several times to persuade the white man to relax for at least an hour and rest. The day and night thus far had been punishing for any man, and especially so for one who had still a great deal of his strength and endurance to regain.

"I'm going to ride into Red Oak," the Lone Ranger told Tonto, "and that's a good two hours in the saddle. I can doze on the way. Silver knows the trail back there."

Tonto countered with a comment, but the masked man explained that he was quite used to spending days and nights on end in the saddle, sleeping there quite easily. "And, anyway," he finished, "I think we're right on the verge of discovering who the leader of those outlaws is. Lonergan said it was the same man that Gimlet mentioned, but I don't think so."

"Tonto at door, then. Hear-um name, 'Yuma.'"

"That's what Lonergan said. I think he lied."

"Who you think leader?"

"I'm not sure yet, Tonto. I've been doing a little thinking while we've been riding." The masked man slowed Silver, and Tonto followed suit. Yuma continued on at the same gait. When the distance had widened so that it was unlikely that conversation would be heard by the captured man, the Lone Ranger outlined what he wanted Tonto to do.

"Turn back," he whispered in a voice that was husky with fatigue. "I'll take care of the prisoner. I'll leave him in the cave, and then ride on to Red Oak."

He spoke rapidly, and Tonto's head bobbed comprehension and approval of the plans. "—the man who rode uphill—" was one of the points the masked man emphasized, "—slimy ground on the mountain, different from that of the gravel-bottomed Gap—" As he talked, the Lone Ranger kept an eye on the big cowpuncher he had captured.

The level Basin ended in steep walls divided by Bryant's Gap. It was here that Tonto halted, lifted his right hand high in a parting gesture, and wheeled Scout about. The Lone Ranger watched his friend sweeping across the Basin on a back trail toward the ranch house. Then he turned, and in the light of an ascending moon, three-quarters grown, he saw that Yuma too had halted and was waiting in the Gap.

It took but a moment for the Lone Ranger to join the prisoner, and then the two rode side by side. After a period of silence, Yuma spoke.

"Can't git it tuh save me," he growled.

"What's that?"

Yuma looked across the space between the horses. "What is yore part in things around here?"

"Why?"

"First yuh ride here like one of the killers. I figger you've murdered Gimlet. Then, yuh lock them skunks in the cellar!"

The Lone Ranger liked the outspoken manner of the man.

"I reckon, from what I heard, you ain't the gent that finished Gimlet."

"No."

"Yer huntin' the leader o' them outlaws. Ain't that so?"

The masked man said, "Stop here for a minute."

Yuma reined up.

"Take a look over there," the Lone Ranger said.

Yuma saw six mounds of stone and earth at the base of a sheer cliff. A crude cross surmounted each of those piles. He nodded grimly.

"I know about 'em. Texas Rangers, ain't they? I heard about the shootin', then a couple of the boys said someone had buried 'em."

"Someone buried them," repeated the Lone Ranger.

"A redskin, or someone wearin' moccasins."

"An Indian," the masked man agreed softly.

After a thoughtful pause, Yuma said, "That pard of yores?"

"That's right."

"Um-h'm." Yuma pondered further while the Lone Ranger waited. "Yuh figger I got somethin' more tuh say?"

"Have you?"

"Reckon so I have. As I size it up, yore out tuh do fer the ones that ambushed those men."

"That," said the other, "is the whole thing in a nutshell. Whatever else may happen, the most important thing to me is to avenge the men who fill those graves."

"You wasn't especial interested in shootin' up some of the skunks that done it," reflected Yuma with regret in his voice.

"They can be picked up later."

"Not if the rest of the pack get back. They'll let 'em out an' then all's goin' tuh break loose till you an' that Injun are fillin' a couple more graves."

"I'm interested in the leader of this outfit."

"What about that purty girl?"

"What about her?"

"Holy smoke!" exploded Yuma, "Can't yuh see the spot the poor girl's in? Or maybe yuh don't savvy. She's got four cousins, an' not one of 'em has the guts tuh protect her. Every skunk in the Basin would like to make a play fer Miss Penny, an' it ain't nothin' exceptin' Bryant Cavendish that keeps 'em from it. Yuh figger Bryant's the leader, don't yuh? Wal, maybe so he is. But I'd a sight sooner he kept on orderin' them crooks around in cattle-stealin' an' sellin' than tuh see him jailed an' Penelope left without him."

"I was told that the leader was a man called 'Yuma.'"

"I heard that. I heard what you told the redskin."

"Gimlet mentioned the same name just before he died."

"But that's a blasted—" Yuma broke off, leaving his speech suspended.

"We'll push ahead now," the Lone Ranger said.

When they were on their way again, the masked man noticed that his prisoner was deep in thought. There were furrows across his forehead; his eyes were half-shut in heavy concentration.

"You haven't told me who you are yet," the Lone Ranger said finally.

"Tain't none of yer business," was the reply. Yuma went on as if simply voicing the thoughts that had been broken by the speech. "Don't make sense at all," he muttered. "Bryant wouldn't let Penny git hurt." The volume of his speech increased a bit. "I never seen a man like you. I bet by gosh, yuh *would* drill Bryant if yuh thought he bossed the murderin' o' them Rangers."

"Don't you think that would be justified?"

"Yuh wouldn't jest take him tuh the law. You'd deal with him personal, eh?"

"That would all depend. Unless I could find witnesses it would be pretty hard to prove a case against him. I understand that he fired at this fellow called Yuma."

The clump of horses' hoofs was the only sound for several moments. The Lone Ranger saw the stream of water shimmering in silver light ahead. Just beyond, he knew, was the cave.

"Suppose," muttered Yuma, "Bryant wasn't the leader of the pack?"

"Who else could be? Certainly Cavendish wouldn't let those outsiders run his ranch for him, and I don't think any of the nephews could pull such thick wool over his eyes."

"Jest suppose that what Lonergan told yuh was the truth."

"What was that?"

"That Yuma was the boss an' that he had a hold on Bryant an' Bryant had tuh do what he wanted? Suppose that was the case, what'd you do?"

"Naturally, I'd hunt for Yuma."

"Bryant went tuh town. Now he couldn't have got back in time tuh have killed old Gimlet, then rid away up that mountain trail yuh mentioned, an' drilled Rangoon like yer Injun pardner told of. Now could he?"

"If he went to Red Oak, he couldn't have been there and back in time, but we don't know that he did go to Red Oak."

"But this gent called Yuma—didn't Miss Penny tell yuh he was still around after Bryant left?"

"Yes."

"So ain't it logical tuh think he might o' kilt Gimlet, jest like Gimlet said, then rid up the mountain, an' killed Rangoon?"

The Lone Ranger could scarcely suppress a smile at the thorough reasoning of his companion. He urged the blond man to continue. "What are you getting at?" he said.

"Me, I ain't nothin' but a cowhand an' ain't been in here long. I ain't had much of anything tuh do yet. I ain't no way important tuh you. Now, if I was tuh tell yuh where you could locate this Yuma yer huntin', would yuh let me go free?"

"But it's Bryant I want."

Yuma became confidential. "Yer wrong."

"Wrong?"

The other nodded. "That's what I said. 'Tain't Bryant yuh want at all. It's Yuma is the leader of the bunch, just like Lonergan said."

The Lone Ranger took this announcement calmly. Yuma, having thought the thing over from all angles, felt that it was vitally important for Penny's sake to keep this masked rider, whose resolute purpose was to capture Bryant, from doing so, since Bryant was the only living man who could protect the girl. He pressed arguments on the Lone Ranger, using everything that Penny had previously told him in her uncle's behalf.

"The old man don't know what's goin' on about the place no more," he said. "He can't walk around no more, can't ride much, can't even see good. Yer barkin' up the wrong tree, stranger, an' I'm agoin' tuh put yuh right."

The irony of it. If only Yuma, in the misdirected chivalry of his glib lies, could have known that it was he, and not the uncle she felt had proved faithless, that the girl wanted. But Yuma didn't know. He went on at great length.

"I'll tell yuh jest where you c'n find Yuma," he concluded, "if you'll promise tuh turn me loose."

The Lone Ranger agreed.

"Then cut the ropes on my hands."

"Whoa, Silver."

"Whoa thar, you, hoss."

The ropes were cut. Yuma chafed his hands for several moments while he scrutinized the Gap in both directions, and weighed his chances. His own horse was fresh, the masked man's had already covered many miles. His rifle was still in its leather scabbard, his six-guns still in place.

"You," he said, kneeing his horse aside, "want tuh know whar Yuma is at, eh?"

The tall masked man nodded.

"Wal, yer lookin' right at him!" A gun leaped into Yuma's hand. "I'd as soon as not drill yuh clean," he barked in a harsh, loud voice, "but if yuh leave me git away, you'll stay alive." He spurred his horse with such a force that the beast fairly leaped off all four feet at once. Another instant, and Yuma was clattering through the Gap away from Bryant's Basin.

"Should o' shot him," he thought, "I should o' shot him, but instead I'll git away. Let him trail me, let him spend a lifetime huntin' me—it'll keep him off'n Bryant's trail." Heedless of the risk, he tore ahead, wind whipping at his face, and neckerchief. He thought of Penelope and something choked in his throat. At least, the girl would be safe while Bryant lived.

It was a heedless, a crazy thing he'd done, but at the time it seemed the only thing. There were half-formed hopes in his mind. Hopes that he could circle back and reach Bryant. Tell him what he'd done and beg the patriarch to provide for Penny's future happiness. Then he'd have a two-gun showdown with those men like Sawtell and Lombard and the worthless cousins. Kill them, as many as he could, before he himself was dropped. Wild plans, plans that only a foolhardy cowboy like Yuma could concoct. He didn't know why he hadn't shot the masked man; perhaps because he knew there would be others to investigate the Texas Ranger murders and the Basin gang.

No. Murder would not have helped. It would simply have delayed the end of Bryant. In making himself the confessed criminal, the leader of the wolf pack, he had done the only thing that his simple mind could think of.

"Git up," he bellowed, and the horse lunged on.

CHAPTER XX - RED OAK

Red Oak as a town was badly misnamed. It was utterly devoid of the implied qualities of sturdiness, solidity, or well-proportioned size. A far more appropriate name might have been chosen. Something, perhaps, like the night-blooming cereus, or the cloyingly sweet nicotine, that sleeps all day and spreads its glory of white petals and sweet odors through the night. But that would be slanderous to the blossoms.

Red Oak slept all day behind the drab, sun-bleached, false-front buildings on both sides of the only road. In rainy weather, fattening sows and lame old mongrel curs would wallow side by side in mudholes made reeking by manure and garbage. When it was hot, the dust was equally intolerable.

The men of town, men who ran or worked in the resorts all night and slept all day, were tallow-faced, and gave the impression of having lived beneath a log or rock or in a woodwork crack. The women by day were sallow, wan, unhappy, and consumptive. Their nocturnal luster was washed out by sunlight, so they remained out of sight until after oil lamps were burning to flatter them and help them sell their wares.

Red Oak's only reason for existence was to serve as an oasis for the men from countless miles of surrounding ranch and range land, and after dark she served and served and served. Proprietors understood their patrons and catered cunningly to their demands for reckless, dangerous sport. They offered varying risks, from loss of cash, through loss of health and reputation, to loss of life itself.

Young cowhands in their 'teens fraternized with gamblers, and killers, each calling for the drink he could afford. Easy women, whose garish, imitation jewelry reflected the glitter of lights through the nebulous tobacco smoke, flaunted their soft hips freely before eyes that were accustomed to longhorned cattle and hard fists of men. For those whose recklessness in younger years had dulled their desire for women, there was gambling and drinking to suit any taste or pocketbook. Bets could be made in thousands, and covered; on the other hand, loose change would buy an evening. There was a jail, a one-room flimsy structure, designed to hold obnoxious drunks whose cash was spent. Slim Peasley was the turnkey. The office was one that would have been beyond his scope if he had tried to fulfill the duties of a deputy sheriff, but Slim didn't. He shuffled about town, his heavy badge weighting down his dirty, limp shirt, cadging a drink where he could and prying his long nose like a chisel into things that were none of his concern, while he closed his eyes to flagrant violations of civil, moral, and spiritual law.

Slim seemed to have no chin at all. His chest was in a hollow made by rounded shoulders. In profile the most striking things about him were his nose and Adam's apple; he had a close resemblance to a question mark. His stretched suspenders let his pants drop low, and his shirt and underwear were generally apart at his stomach, so that he could scratch. There seemed always to be some part of Slim's anatomy that needed scratching, and the degree of his absorption in whatever he might be looking at could be measured by the part he scratched.

It was Slim Peasley who had locked Mort Cavendish up. Bryant had turned his nephew over to the deputy at nine o'clock, before the evening in Red Oak got really started. Slim had actually looked frightened when he found he'd have to guard a sober man until the sheriff came from the county seat to take over. When Bryant placed the charge of murder against his nephew, Slim grew pale. Only stern Bryant's blustered threats made Slim accept the responsibility as the lesser danger. Then Bryant had limped his way along the street, cursing the trollops who accosted him. He had entered the hotel and rented a room in the rear of the first floor so that he wouldn't have to torture himself needlessly with stairs. He was asleep when the evening reached a peak at midnight.

At midnight, or shortly after, the Lone Ranger reached the outskirts of Red Oak, not far from the center of the town. He turned off the trail and guided Silver to the rear of the row of buildings on one side. He felt considerably rested after dozing in the saddle during the ride from the Gap, and ready for whatever might be ahead. His original intention to talk with Bryant Cavendish had not been changed by the confession of his prisoner, who had escaped.

In the shadow of the buildings he dismounted and left Silver, to proceed on foot. Coming to the back of the hotel, he turned and passed through the space between the buildings. At one end of the porch he halted. A man was coming along the road. The Lone Ranger held cupped hands close to his face, as if in the act of lighting a pipe. The gesture, together with his forward-tilted hat, served to conceal the fact that he was masked. He had to be extremely careful in Red Oak. There were people there in the town who had known him as a Texas Ranger. He had hoped that the clerk in the Red Oak Hotel would be a stranger, and that with his mask removed and his face somewhat concealed by dust, he could inquire as to the location of Bryant's room.

He was, however, spared this trouble. Between his fingers he saw the over-dressed man who passed him mount the steps and enter the hotel lobby. There was something about the man that was vaguely familiar, yet the Lone Ranger was sure he never had seen him before. He heard the high-heeled, beautifully shined boots clatter on the floor to the accompaniment of jingling spurs. He could see through the door at an oblique angle. He heard the stranger ask about Bryant Cavendish.

"Room ten," the clerk said curtly, "an' he left strict orders that he wasn't tuh be pestered."

"That's too bad," replied the other, "because I'm going tuh disturb him plenty right now." The clerk tried to argue but got nowhere. "Room ten," marked the Lone Ranger. He left his post beside the porch and hastened to the rear of the building. A dark window from room ten was opened wide. The masked man crouched beneath it as he heard an insistent pounding on the door.

Bryant Cavendish groaned first in sleep and then in waking. "What’s goin on?" he grumbled.

The bed creaked. Then the rapping on the door again.

"G'way," snapped Bryant, "I'm sleepin'."

"Open the door," replied a muffled voice.

"Who is it an' what d'ya want?"

"Wallie."

That accounted for the familiarity in the man's face. Wallie Cavendish, who had a resemblance in the eyes and forehead to both Vince and Jeb.

A matchlight flickered in the room, and then the steadier light of a candle. The Lone Ranger risked discovery to peer over the edge of the window. He saw Bryant, shirtless, sitting on the edge of the bed, rubbing his eyes sleepily. The man muttered something beneath his breath, then rose and steadied himself by gripping the edge of a table.

"I'm comin'," he called, "wait a minute." The old man had to resume his seat on the bed and rub his knees. Again he stood, and this time managed to get to the door and slip the bolt.

The Lone Ranger felt guilty at his eavesdropping, yet he felt that he was justified in gathering what facts he could in any way that he could get them. The game he played had life itself as the stake, and the odds were against him to begin with. Wallie entered the bedroom with a swaggering manner and closed the door behind him. "Yer stayin' in Red Oak all night, eh?" he asked.

"Did you wake me up tuh ask *that*?" snarled Bryant. "What does it look like I'm doin'? It's too hard a trip fer me tuh go back home. I'll go back in the mornin'."

"That's not what I came for, Uncle Bryant," said Wallie hastily. "Don't jump me so till I finish."

"Wal?"

"I found a woman that'll look after the kids."

"Humph! I didn't think you could tend to a job as complete as that. When'll she come to the Basin?"

"That's just it," replied the fop hesitantly. "I—I tried tuh talk her intuh goin' there, but she wouldn't. She said that she'd look after 'em, if we paid her of course, an' if we brought the kids here tuh live with her."

"I knowed it. Well, find someone else! Find someone that'll come tuh the Basin." Wallie shook his head slowly.

"I dunno as I can. It ain't easy tuh find a woman around here that'd take good care of the youngsters."

While Bryant appeared to ponder this, Wallie went on quickly. "I thought maybe Penelope could come along with 'em fer a few days, till Mrs. Hastings gets sort of acquainted with 'em. Wouldn't that be a good way?"

"Maybe so."

"Good enough then, Uncle Bryant. I didn't want tuh do nothin' till I'd talked tuh you about it. I won't bother you no more now. I'm sorry tuh disturb you, but I figgered on ridin' back home with the rest of the boys, an' I wanted tuh get yer okey on this Mrs. Hastings so's I could tell Penelope."

"You through talkin' now?"

Wallie rose. "Reckon so. You'll be comin' back on the buckboard, won't yuh?"

"How else could I git home? Didn't I fetch the buckboard?"

"That's right, Uncle Bryant, I'm sorry not tuh have thought it out."

"Now get outta here an' lemme git some sleep."

Still Wallie didn't go. He shifted his weight uneasily from one foot to the other. "There-there's somethin' I wanted tuh say," he fumbled. "I—I don't want yuh tuh git sore about it...."

"*Wal?*"

"I thought it was a right smart scheme of yores, the way yuh handled Mort."

"Mort kilt his wife, didn't he?"

"That's right, Uncle Bryant."

"I wouldn't let that squirt called Yuma know I turned Mort over tuh the law; he'd figger I done it on account of bein' scairt o' him. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of knowin' Mort was jailed fer murder." Wallie grinned synthetically. His whole manner before Bryant Cavendish was one of cowering subjugation, of fawning in a way that must have been revolting to the hard old man.

"Yuh done jest right," he said. "I'd never o' thought of it, Uncle Bryant. Yuh jailed Mort, an' that took care of the legal angles; of course yuh couldn't be expected tuh let him be swung from a rope." Bryant looked up sharply.

"No one'll ever know how he busted out. Fact is, he might o' broke outen that jail without no outside help."

"He's out?" exclaimed Bryant. Wallie nodded, a look of surprise on his face. "Didn't you know it?"

"No. I didn't know it. I been sleepin' here. How in the devil would I know?"

"Gosh! Then he must've got out without no help, unless be bribed Slim Peasley."

"Where is he now?"

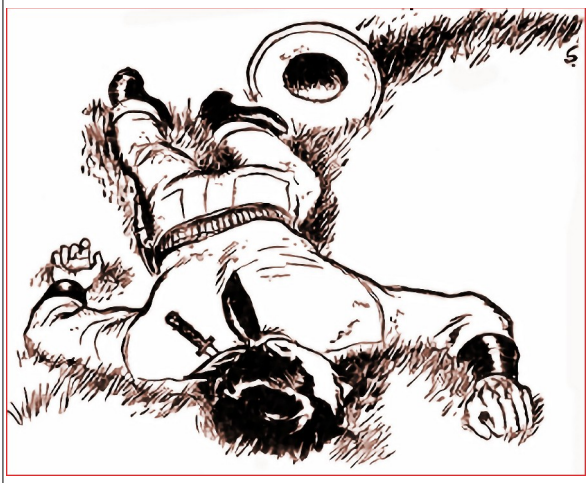
"I dunno. I jest heard a while ago in one of the saloons that he was loose. Peasley acted real upset about it." Surprisingly, Bryant made no further comment. Wallie waited a moment longer, then turned and opened the door. "Good night, Uncle Bryant," he said.

Bryant said nothing. The door closed, and the old man sat there for fully five minutes, muttering unintelligibly. Then he rose and would have blown out the candle, but he was halted by a voice from the window.

"Stay right where you are and don't yell."

The Lone Ranger stepped easily over the low windowsill and into the room, as Bryant Cavendish turned.

CHAPTER XXI - AN ADMISSION FROM BRYANT CAVENDISH



A close-range view of Bryant Cavendish fulfilled everything the Lone Ranger might have expected from what he had heard about him. His face looked as if it had been chopped out of a block of granite. His eyes, small, deep-set, were the coldest, hardest eyes that he had ever seen. They were the eyes of a man who would die before he would forgive a wrong; a man who had lived with hate. Bryant showed not the slightest trace of fear.

Even in his undershirt he could look haughty and arrogant. He met the steady gaze of the masked man, his mouth clamped hard-shut.

"Cavendish," began the Lone Ranger in a low but very decisive voice, "I've come a long way to talk to you."

There was no reply.

"First of all, what do you know about the murder of some Texas Rangers in Bryant's Gap?"

There was no change in the older man's expression. His chin lifted just the slightest bit, but he said nothing. Neither did he nod or shake his head.

"There are men working for you who are wanted by the law," continued the Lone Ranger. "Six Texas Rangers went through the Gap to arrest men you know as Sawtell, Rangoon, Lonergan, and Lombard. Those Rangers were ambushed. Did you know that?"

Cavendish spoke. His voice was scarcely more than a whisper, but the intensity of it, the suppressed emotion that was dripping from his words, seemed to make the ends of the masked man's nerves vibrate.

"You—" he said. "Git!"

"Not yet, Cavendish; we have a lot of things to talk about." The Lone Ranger moved nearer to the flint-faced Bryant and sat down, facing the open window, with his back against the door.

"There's a renegade army of bandits across the border. They've been buying Cavendish-brand cattle. That in itself has been handled in a perfectly legal manner. The cattle have been sold on this side of the border. There's another angle to it, however. Ranches surrounding your basin land have been struck by thieves. A lot of cattle have been stolen and several men have been murdered. These assaults have been generally blamed on Ricardo's renegades. But that hasn't been the case. Ricardo has bought your cattle, and the stolen cattle have been herded into your basin."

The Lone Ranger paused. It looked as if Cavendish were about to speak. He trembled a little as he said, "Fer the last time, stranger, *git*."

"Not yet, Cavendish. I'll tell you some more. The stolen cattle are taken into the Basin by a trail that comes straight down one side of Thunder Mountain. Once in the Basin, the cattle are treated to a running iron and the brand changed to one of the many brands that are registered in your name. 'Circle Bar' stock is changed to the 'Eight Box.' 'Lazy S' becomes the 'Eight-on-One-Side.' I could go on with many other brands you've registered; brands that can be made out of the marks on stolen cattle. The newly branded stock is held in the Basin until the scars heal over. Then it is taken out through the mountain trail, while other stock is brought in. Now you realize that I'm aware of what is going on."

Bryant's agitation could never have been caused by fear; therefore it must have been an anger that was almost consuming him. The Lone Ranger's voice became sharper as he went on, driving home every point emphatically. He himself was angry. The stolid manner of Bryant, the refusal to acknowledge that he even heard the masked man's statements called for will power that was almost incomprehensible in the face of the cold facts.

"In connection with the cattle-stealing, you've furnished a haven for any outlaws who wanted to hide there. I don't know how you contacted all those fugitives, but it[185] was managed somehow. They learned that Texas Rangers had been sent for, so they ambushed those men. If others go there, they will either meet the same fate or find a perfectly innocent-looking ranch, while the 'wanted' men hide in the mountain retreat. Am I right?"

Bryant Cavendish spoke again.

"If you're right, what're you goin' to do about it?"

"You have a niece, a girl named Penelope."

Mention of the girl's name brought a quick reaction. Bryant's hard jaw shot forward and he snapped, "You leave her out o' this."

"I'm sorry, but I can't leave her out. It's for her that I'm speaking. She has always trusted you, Cavendish, in spite of everything she saw; the type of men you hired; the trail on Thunder Mountain; in spite of the murder of the Texas Rangers, that girl has believed in you. She would never have believed you capable of leading a gang to steal the cattle that Ricardo and his men did not dare to steal, and selling them to him at a low enough price so that he could resell at a profit on the other side of the border.

"You ask what I'm going to do? I'm going to ask you to help put thieves in jail, and send murderers to pay in full. You're an old man, Cavendish. At best you have but a few years left, and after that what is there for Penelope? Who is going to take care of that girl when you're gone? Would you leave her to the mercies of those cousins of hers, or the killers like Sawtell and Lombard?

"I'll lay my cards right out on the table. I can't, at the present time, do anything. That's why I've come to you. There must be something that's turned you from an honest man ... to this. What is it? Tell me, and let me help you straighten things out. Tell me, who has a hold over you, who's making you do these things?"

The Lone Ranger drew a folded paper from his pocket and spread it on the table before Bryant Cavendish. His eyes were fixed on Cavendish, who seemed to be waging an inward battle for composure. Cavendish glanced at the paper, then at the Lone Ranger.

"This," the masked man said, "is a document that Lonergan drew up. It has a place for your relations to sign their names. And when they do so they accept a certain consideration from you, and agree that when your will is read they —"

"I know all about that," snapped Bryant.

"That's what I was uncertain about. Your signature isn't required on this, and it would have been a simple matter for Lonergan to have written it and had your relatives sign, without your knowledge."

Cavendish showed more of an inclination to talk.

"It's legal, ain't it?" he asked as if there were some doubt in his mind.

"It is legal."

"That's all I want tuh know."

"You wanted it prepared?"

"Sure."

"But there must be a will, your will, with your signature. That would have to be left to name the people who inherit all your land."

"There's a will too. All signed an' witnessed."

Bryant pushed himself to his feet, and stood above the seated masked man.

"I never explained nothin'," he barked. "I never asked fer help or favors, an' I never will. When the time comes that I can't handle my affairs, I'll be ready tuh lie down an' die. I dunno how yuh got that paper, but yer goin' tuh hand it tuh me right now. It's mine an' I'll have it."

"You won't explain a thing?" repeated the Lone Ranger.

"You heard me!"

The masked man rose and turned to face the other squarely, taking his eyes away from the window to do so. "I hoped," he said, "that we might work together, but you won't have it that way. If you're sure this paper is just the way you want it—" The Lone Ranger broke off when a shot crashed into the room from a gun beyond the window.

Bryant Cavendish gasped, then staggered back, clutching with both hands at his broad chest. He stumbled and fell across the bed. The Lone Ranger's gun leaped up while the masked man sprang to the window. He saw a man's form running fast. It was too dark in the shadows to determine much about the fugitive, but it was obvious that it was he who had fired the shot at Bryant. The Lone Ranger's gun barked, and a silver bullet flew. The running man spilled forward, rolling from his own momentum.

There was hammering upon the door. Men's shouts demanded to know what the shooting was about. The Lone Ranger holstered his gun. Ignoring the yells and[188] shouts outside the room, he bent over the wounded man. Bryant still breathed, but his pulse was ragged and his eyes were closed.

Another instant and those outside would smash the door and force their way inside. To be found there masked, with Cavendish shot, and one bullet gone from his own gun, would mean the certain capture and probable lynching of the Lone Ranger. He had no choice. He lifted Bryant Cavendish and carried him toward the window.

The dead weight of the unconscious man was too much for the Lone Ranger, in his fatigued and weakened condition, to handle quickly. He rested his burden on the window's sill then whistled sharply once.

The whistle brought renewed shouting from the men beyond the door. Their cries were wild and unorganized. Some cried to the world at large, "Bust in—bust down the door—don't let 'em out—he's in thar, I heard him." These and

other cries were mixed with shouts of warning and advice: "Don't yuh try tuh git away—we got yuh trapped—come out an' surrender or we shoot tuh kill."

If only the door and the bolt would withstand the assault of the first few blows! Silver was coming fast, racing toward the window where the masked man waited. The big stallion clattered close and whinnied shrilly while the men in the hall yelled new suggestions. "He's got a hoss outside. Git around tuh the winder. I hear a hoss. Thar's a hull gang o' them in thar." In a moment Bryant was thrown across the saddle. The masked man leaped behind him as a shattering blow shivered the door and the wall that supported it.

"Come on, Silver!" the Lone Ranger called. He couldn't leave the vicinity just yet. There was one thing of which he must make certain. He rode to the man he'd shot. Leaping from the saddle, he found the wounded man quite conscious, but in pain from a bullet in the fleshy part of his thigh. "Not serious," he muttered. "You'll be all right as soon as—"

He broke off with a gasp of surprise. This man's bullet wound was slight, but the man was dying. There was another weapon, a knife of the sort that can be easily thrown. All that showed was the handle, sticking straight out from the back of the stranger's neck.

It took but an instant for the Lone Ranger to visualize what had happened. This fugitive, having fired point-blank at Bryant Cavendish, had raced on foot to reach a clump of trees. Perhaps his horse was waiting there, perhaps a trusted friend. This "friend" or someone else within the shelter of the trees had thrown the knife after the Lone Ranger's shot had dropped the man, probably to seal his lips with death.

Whatever the purpose of the murder, the man on the ground would never talk. It was little short of miraculous that he had lived at all after taking the knife in such a vital place. The Lone Ranger could do nothing. The man slipped into unconsciousness, with death a few seconds away.

Meanwhile the Lone Ranger was in danger.

Yelling, shouting men were charging, some on foot and some on horseback from the rear of the hotel. There was no time for thought or planning. The only important thing right now was escape.

The Lone Ranger leaped, and shouted, "Hi-Yo Silver!"

The stallion lunged ahead while bullets buzzed too close.

Leaning low over the strong neck of Silver, the masked man clung to Bryant Cavendish. "Now," he thought, "those men will not only think I've shot Cavendish, but shot and killed that other man as well." He slapped Silver on the neck. "Old boy," he cried, "from now on we've got to travel fast. If they catch us, it will mean a lynching."

CHAPTER XXII – STALEMATE

The shooting's aftermath in Red Oak: Some insisted that a posse be formed at once to scour the country for the unknown rider who had taken Bryant Cavendish with him. Others were in favor of letting the law, represented by Slim Peasley, take its fumbling course, while the majority asked resentfully what the disturbance was all about, then turned back to drinks, games, women, or combinations of the same. Wallie Cavendish was much in evidence, for once in his life looking hot-faced and somewhat disheveled. He insisted that prompt action be taken; that something be done about his uncle's abduction.

"A lot you care about him," snapped Jim Bates, the hotel owner. "Now he's gone, yuh know well yer ready tuh let out a war whoop of plain an' fancy cheerin'."

Wallie ignored the comment and spoke to the group assembled in the lobby.

"It's high time there was some law around this place. First Mort gets out of jail, without half-tryin', then Uncle Bryant's carried away, likely dead, an' all we got is that buzzard-bait Peasley. That man on the white horse was leaning over someone when he was seen, wasn't he?"

Someone in the crowd said, "Yeah."

"Well, what about him? Is anything bein' done?"

"He's bein' brought in here. Some of the boys went tuh see about him."

"High time," barked Wallie with a fire that was unusual.

"The boys that had horses handy went after that critter," explained Jim Bates. "Maybe they'll catch him."

"And if they do," said Wallie, "they'll jail him the same as they did Mort, an' ten minutes after Slim's back's turned, he'll be scot-free again."

"I thought you had a hunch," said Jim Bates, "that it was yer Uncle Bryant that let Mort out of the calaboose."

"That's what I thought."

"Mebbe this *hombre* that rid away won't have no Uncle Bryant tuh let him loose."

The door opened, and men came in carrying a still form which they placed on the plank floor near the wall.

"He's dead," one of them said, looking at Wallie with a strange expression.

"Is it anyone we know?" asked Bates.

One of the newcomers nodded seriously. "Yup, it shore is." He stood aside. One leg showed the red result of a bullet wound, but this was hardly more than a scratch. In the back of his neck the handle of a knife still showed. The man was Mort Cavendish.

"My brother!" exclaimed Wallie. "It's Mort." He wheeled to the silent men around him. "Who done this?" he asked. "Who'd want to kill poor Mort? He never hurt no one in his life. He—"

Jim Bates stepped up. "Listen tuh me," he said sharply. "We don't want none of yer crocodile actin' around here. In the first place, whoever stuck that knife in Mort's neck saved him bein' strung up tuh hang fer killin' his wife. You know that well. In the second place, yuh never cared about any of yer family, an' yuh still don't. With Mort done fer, it's jest one less tuh whack up Bryant's Basin."

Wallie stood a moment, then he said in a calmer voice, "All right, Bates, Bryant's gone an' Mort's killed. Now let's figure out who done it."

"What d'you care?" Wallie was obviously not well liked by the men in Red Oak. Their manner showed that they cared nothing about helping him. The man who died had deserved killing, and no sympathy was wasted. If the murderer had walked in at that moment, it was quite likely that he would have been told that his duty was to handle the burial expenses as a moral obligation, then take drinks on the house.

"Only thing I don't like," muttered someone, "is this knifin' business. It ain't good form no-ways. Why, when that critter dropped Mort with the shot in the leg, didn't he finish him with another slug, 'stead o' stickin' him like this?"

"You can't leave him there," said Jim Bates. "What d'ya want done with the remains?"

Wallie dug into his pocket and dumped what cash he had on the hotel desk. "You handle things," he told Bates. "Have the coroner do whatever has to be done, then hire someone with a cart to haul him to the Basin. I'll have him buried there."

Bates nodded, scooping up the cash. "I'll tend tuh things. Whatever Mort had in his pockets was took out by Peasley when he jailed him. I reckon you c'n get his cash an' whatever else he had from Slim."

"I will."

"Hold on," said Bates. "Old Bryant has a buckboard an' team in the shed. He brought 'em when he came. Why don't you take Mort back in that yer own self?"

Wallie explained that he was leaving shortly and would drive the team and ride the buckboard, with his own horse hitched behind. He had to hurry though, and didn't care to wait until the coroner's work was finished. In fact, he planned to start back for the Basin right away. He wanted to be there by daybreak.

"All right, then," said Bates. "I'll see that everything's tended to."

Further conversation and conjecture was carried to the nearest saloon. The general opinion seemed to be that Bryant had helped his nephew out of jail. Then someone unknown had called upon Bryant. Mort had found him there, when trying to sneak into the room. The unknown man had fired, but Mort had run away. The gunman had fired again, and this time he hit Bryant. Blood on the bed proved that Bryant had been hit. Then pursuit of Mort, who ran despite the wounded leg, led to his final death by stabbing. The eyewitnesses from the hotel room had first seen the stranger with the white horse standing close to Mort. That was just before he had ridden away. This explanation suited everyone, and further action was dependent on Slim Peasley. Which meant that there probably would be no further investigation.

Wallie went from place to place, locating the men from the Basin, telling them what had happened and suggesting that they start at once for home. He was the last to leave Red Oak. By the time he had driven the buckboard through the rough, rocky bottom of the Gap, the cowhands had been home for some time. When he drove in at daybreak, he found them still awake and excited over the discovery of old Gimlet.

They hadn't found Sawtell, Rangoon, Lombard, or Lonergan in the bunkhouse.

"Dunno where them boys went," they said. "They don't dare risk goin' tuh Red Oak, because yuh never can tell when the sheriff'll be there, or maybe a Ranger, or some gent that'd recognize 'em an' turn 'em in fer the reward."

Wallie was tired and annoyed at the missing quartet. He ordered fresh horses hitched to the buckboard, gave instructions for the disposal of old Gimlet's body, then went to the house. Throwing open the door, he stopped abruptly.

A strange sight greeted him. One lamp was lighted. Though the wick was turned low, there was sufficient illumination to reveal disorder in the room. On top of a table, a chair; on the chair a log, braced against the beamed ceiling. Sitting near the fireplace, Wallie saw an Indian.

Furiously angry, he started forward, then halted again. The Indian was wide-awake, holding a heavy revolver in his hand.

"What the—?" started Wallie.

"You," muttered the Indian, "close door. Sit down. We wait."

"Wait for what? Who are yuh, and what're yuh doin' here? What's all this mean?"

"Girl wake pretty quick," the Indian replied. "She tell you."

A howl from beneath his feet made Wallie jump. Tonto grinned at his surprise. "Bad feller," he explained, "down there. Girl tell you, when she wake."

"I'm awake."

It was Penelope, wrapped in a bathrobe, coming down the stairs.

Daybreak found the Lone Ranger once more in the saddle. He rode slowly at first, but as the light increased and made the trail he followed more distinct, he increased his speed. With several hours' rest the masked man felt much better. Tonto, he was sure, could handle things at the ranch house until Wallie returned. The Indian's position there would be explained by Penny. Bryant Cavendish had been left in the cave. Now the Lone Ranger rode in pursuit of Yuma.

Wallie with the wagon, and all the horsemen going to the Basin, had passed close to the cave in Bryant's Gap while the masked man and Bryant Cavendish were there. The hoofs of these men's horses had in many cases blotted out the tracks of Yuma, but an occasional mark where the shale was soft assured the masked man that he was still on the trail of the one he sought.

There were times when he had to dismount and examine the ground closely to make sure he hadn't gone astray.

Then he found that Yuma had left the Gap. New scratches on the rocks of one side of it showed where his horse had fought its way up an almost sheer as-

cent to gain the level land above. The Lone Ranger guided Silver up the same path. Now the ground, covered in most places by a sort of turf, was softened by the recent rains and held distinct hoofprints of the big cowpuncher's horse.

"Come on, Silver," the Lone Ranger called as he saw the trail stretching out toward the horizon. The stallion fairly flew over the ground that felt so soft after the sharp and sliding stones of the Gap.

The marks of Yuma's horse were spaced to show that it too had traveled at top speed. But Yuma had ridden in the darkness, which was probably the reason that his horse had fallen. The Lone Ranger saw the gopher hole into which the horse had stepped, and near by, the body of the horse itself. He dismounted and examined the ground.

Marks clearly showed that Yuma had spilled over the head of the falling horse. The dead horse was a few yards distant. The foreleg, to judge from its position, unquestionably was broken. A bullet through the head had ended the beast's suffering. Yuma had taken the most essential things from his duffle and left the rest. His footprints led on in the same direction he'd been going.

The masked man mounted and rode on. It wasn't long before he saw a pile of rocks. They were huge boulders, tossed into the middle of an open plain, as if left and forgotten by the Builder in some era eons ago when the world was made. The footprints led directly toward these rocks.

"That," mused the Lone Ranger, "is where the man I want has taken refuge. I wonder if he'll shoot. I doubt it." He rode ahead, considering the type of man he had to face. What he had seen of Yuma had left a rather favorable impression. When the cowboy had claimed leadership of the cattle-stealing organization, the Lone Ranger had doubted the truth of what he said. It had seemed obvious that Yuma sought to shield Bryant Cavendish, in order that the old man might remain alive and free to safeguard Penny.

The masked man slowed Silver to a walk, and drew his gun. He advanced slowly, without taking his eyes off the rocks. Presently the cowboy's head popped out, then a quick shot struck the ground a little to one side of the Lone Ranger. He rode on slowly. A hundred yards away from the natural fortress, the masked man dismounted, then went forward on foot.

"I'm coming to get you, Yuma," he shouted.

"I won't be taken alive," came the reply. "Git aboard that hoss an' vamoose. I don't want tuh drill yuh."

The Lone Ranger walked ahead. Another shot, this time one that whistled as it passed. The space had narrowed down to fifty yards when Yuma cried again.

"Stand back, I tell yuh, stranger. I don't want tuh kill yuh. Yuh can't take me alive. Them shots was only warnin's. Now go back."

The masked man made no reply. Nor did he change his pace or course. Long strides carried him ahead. He held one gun in readiness, but didn't return the shots that had been fired toward him. Thirty yards away.

"Yuma shouted, "you're goin' tuh make me kill yuh. This is yer last chance. Now turn back!"

The Lone Ranger took five more strides forward; then Yuma fired again. This time the bullet tugged at the sleeve of his shirt. Yuma was either shooting to kill and missing, or shooting with rare skill to come as close as he could without inflicting injury. While he walked forward, the Lone Ranger called again, "You know you're not going to kill me, Yuma, because if you do there'll be others here to take my place. I'm coming to ram your lies down your throat!"

His heavy gun was still unfired. Ten paces from the rock he halted.

"I can put a bullet through you, Yuma, the next time you look out from behind that rock to fire at me. I don't want to do it. I don't even want to shoot your gun away, because I may need your help. I don't want your gun hand wounded. Now come out!"

Yuma's voice came from behind the rocks. "Next time I fire," he shouted, "I'll shoot tuh kill. Heaven help me, stranger, I don't want tuh do that, but I swear I'll have tuh. It's you or me, an' it's not goin' tuh be me."

"I'm waiting for you," the Lone Ranger replied.

"If yuh don't turn back when I count three, I'll fire."

Yuma started counting slowly. "One ... two ..." And then a pause. "Fer the love of Heaven, turn back."

"I'm still waiting, Yuma."

"All knows, yuh asked fer it." Yuma shouted, "Three!" and then leaped out from behind the rock and fired.

CHAPTER XXIII - YUMA RIDES BEHIND A MASKED MAN

The Lone Ranger almost fired instinctively at Yuma. His finger tightened on the trigger, but he caught himself in time. Yuma's last, quick shot went wide. The cowboy stood entirely clear of the rocks that had protected him, holding his gun point-blank on the masked man. For a moment the two stood there tense, each one covering the other, neither moving, neither firing.

Then Yuma let out a wild cry as he threw his six-gun on the ground. "You win, hang it all, I can't shoot yuh. Come on an' take me prisoner."

The Lone Ranger closed the space. He holstered his own gun, then bent and picked up Yuma's weapon.

"Put this where it belongs," he said, extending the weapon butt-end first, "in your holster. You'll probably be needing it again."

There were tears of futility in Yuma's eyes. "I dunno," he said, accepting the gun, "what,s the matter with me. Why didn't I shoot yuh? Why'd I let yuh take me?"

"Because you're not a killer," replied the masked man simply.

"You think I ain't? I'm the man that's—"

"Just a minute, Yuma. You tried to tell me that you were the leader of the Basin gang. In spite of that, I went in to Red Oak last night. I found Bryant Cavendish there. I showed him a document that his friends were trying to

make Penelope sign and he admitted that it was just the way he had dictated it. I want you to look it over."

He took the paper from his pocket, unfolded it, and handed it to Yuma. Then he stood patiently silent to give the big blond man a chance to read it. Yuma seemed to find some difficulty in wading through the legal terms and phrases. He guided his eyes from one word to the next with his finger, and when he finished he said, "Does this mean that Penny ain't tuh have no part o' Bryant's property when he kicks in?"

The Lone Ranger said, "Some of the relatives of the old man have already signed it. Penny among them."

Yuma looked at the signatures. "Then she's done outen her share?"

"According to that, Penelope will have no claim on the land unless Bryant wills it to her. When she signed that, she lost all her faith in Bryant Cavendish. Furthermore, I doubt if Bryant will be able to give her much protection now."

"Why not?"

"He was shot last night."

"Shot?"

The Lone Ranger nodded, then went on to tell Yuma the events in Red Oak, relating what he had heard of Mort's imprisonment and ultimate escape, the shot that was fired at Bryant, and the knifing of the man who fired that shot. "I was not seen," he said, "but they must have had a look at my horse and they certainly heard me call the horse Silver. I've no doubt that I'll be accused of both the shooting of Bryant Cavendish and the knifing of the man who really shot him."

Yuma nodded comprehension and agreement. "The same sort o' killin' that old Gimlet got," he said thoughtfully. "I reckon the same skunk done both knifin's."

"Quite likely."

"Now Bryant won't be able tuh guard Miss Penny no more, bein' that he's dead."

"I didn't say that he was dead."

"Then he ain't dead?"

"No."

"How close to it is he?"

"There's a good chance for him to recover. I have him hidden in a cave in the Gap."

Yuma reflected on the things that he'd been told. He muttered half aloud and then quite suddenly went berserk. He snatched off his hat, whirled it about his head several times, then threw it on the ground. He jumped on it with both feet while he shouted at the top of his voice. His face was livid with blind rage and fury. He swore with the sincerity of a hen with fresh-hatched chicks and the vocabulary of a mule skinner. He called himself an addleheaded jackass and a crackbrained fool in Mexican as well as English. He berated his bungling, fumbling, thoughtless notions and cursed himself for trying to help Penny by the "loco" means he'd used. He ranted, raved, and raged because he'd taken blame that properly belonged to a double-dyed, limp-brained, stone-faced, soulless old son of a three-tongued rattler, meaning Bryant Cavendish. He declared with rare vehemence that Bryant deserved boiling in hot coal oil, then skinning alive.

Before he ran out of things to say, his breath gave out and he was forced to stop and gasp. His face was red, his eyes were bloodshot from emotion. He grabbed the front of the Lone Ranger's shirt in one huge hand.

"Listen," he said breathlessly, "listen tuh me. I lied when I said I was the leader o' them murderin' skunks an' cattle rustlers. It's Bryant that's the leader. I only thought tuh—"

"I know, Yuma," the Lone Ranger interrupted. "You didn't want Bryant to be taken away from Penelope because he alone could safeguard her."

Yuma still clutched the masked man's shirt. It happened that his hand had closed over the breast pocket, and in that pocket rested the Texas Ranger badge. "I came for you," the Lone Ranger went on, "because it is you that Penelope needs."

"She needs me?" repeated Yuma eagerly. And then in a voice filled with woe, "Aw-w, that ain't so. I know the way she acted tuh me. If I go around where she is, she'll box my ears down."

"I think she's changed her mind about a lot of things since she saw the document her uncle wanted signed. You come along with me, Yuma—you're needed badly."

"Wish't they was somethin' I could do tuh put them crooks all where they belong," said Yuma wistfully. "Of course I c'n jest shoot Bryant when I git tuh him, an' finish what's already started."

"No, you're not going to shoot Bryant Cavendish; you're a witness against him."

"Huh?"

"He tried to kill you. You'll go to law and charge him with attempted murder."

"Me? Go tuh law?" asked Yuma with an amazed look.

The masked man nodded.

"Yuh—yuh mean," said the cowboy, still unable to fully comprehend, "I'm tuh go an' report that he shot at me, an' ask that he be judged fer it?"

"Right."

"But man, I can't do *that*. Who ever heard o' bein' shot at an' then reportin' it tuh law instead o' shootin' back an' settlin' the matter on the spot?"

The Lone Ranger explained that there had to be some charge filed against Bryant Cavendish to put him in jail. Once there, he could be questioned endlessly until his part in the cattle stealing and the murders was brought out. Merely killing the man would do nothing to solve the killing of the Texas Rangers, of Gimlet, or the man who fired at him the night before. Yuma finally agreed to follow the Lone Ranger's advice, to do whatever he was told; but went on record that he was sure "goin' tuh feel like a fool sissy" when he went "tuh the law tuh beef about bein' shot at."

The two boarded the masked man's powerful horse. Before they left the rocks Yuma said, "One thing more, stranger. Jest who the devil are you?"

"If I wanted that known, Yuma, I wouldn't be masked."

Yuma spoke slowly. "When I took ahold of yer shirt, I felt somethin' in yer pocket. It was shaped mighty like a Ranger's badge. I been wonderin' if maybe you ain't a Texas Ranger, an' if so, why the mask?"

"Perhaps I used to belong to the Texas Rangers, Yuma."

"Well—" Yuma paused. "Look here, I can't go on callin' yuh 'stranger'; jest what should I call yuh?"

"My closest friend," the masked man said, "calls me 'The Lone Ranger.'" He heeled Silver, and the stallion lunged forward. Yuma had to cling to keep from spilling. "Hi-Yo Silver, Away-y-y-y," the Lone Ranger shouted.

Such speed in a horse was new to Yuma. He gasped at the power in the long, driving legs of white.

"G-g-gosh," he said against the wind, "this is shore 'nuff a ridin' hoss! I sort o' like that name 'Lone Ranger,' too!"

CHAPTER XXIV - BRYANT GOES HOME

Bryant Cavendish, sitting in the cave, felt curiously at ease. His wound was almost superficial and, because of the first aid which his masked abductor had applied, caused him no discomfort whatsoever. His only inconvenience was the lashings about his wrists and ankles that made him helpless. Yet it was this helplessness that gave him the odd feeling of being relaxed. For the first time that he could remember, there was not a thing that he felt he should be doing or supervising. With nothing that could be done, he felt no pangs in idleness. He had been furiously angry at first when he realized that he'd been carried away bodily. It was a bitter blow to his pride.[208] The trip from Red Oak had been humiliating as well as exhausting, but now the iron-jawed old man almost gloried in his helplessness.

He sat trying to recall vague moments in the past half day. He could remember little after the shot in his hotel room. He must have been unconscious during most of the trip from Red Oak to the Gap. The masked man was in the Gap when Bryant recovered his senses, and explained in a soft voice exactly where the two were going. Then there had been a session in the cave when the first aid was administered by candlelight. Darkness again, and a resonant, kindly voice that said, "You'll be all right here for the time being. I'm going to ride out again, but I'll be here when you waken at daybreak." Bryant had slept after that, and wakened to find the masked man's promise fulfilled. The stranger was with him, but not for long. He rode off on the horse called Silver.

Shortly after daybreak Bryant had heard a team and wagon coming close. His shouts were answered when the wagon stopped and an Indian scaled the ledge and entered the cave. Bryant had demanded that the Indian release him, but there had been no sign that the newcomer could understand the white man's tongue. Bryant resented the manner in which he had been inspected by the redskin, the way the ropes and their knots were critically examined; then the way his bandage was removed, the wound studied carefully and then redressed. The Indian had made no comment whatsoever. He finished his investigation and then left the cave. After a lapse of several moments the team and buckboard moved away. Bryant had noted that the outfit came from the Basin and headed in the opposite direction.

Another hour elapsed, then Yuma came. And when the cowboy came he made it known. His entrance was accompanied by a shout. "You—" he bellowed, "yuh dirty schemin' crook yuh, I had tuh come here an' tell yuh what I think!" Bryant looked up with his jaw set in its customary stubborn way.

"Tuh think," roared Yuma, "that I took cash money from you an' worked on that murder ranch o' yores. Thinkin' o' that makes me turn green inside. If I had any o' that cash left I'd ram it down yer gullet an' hope it'd strangle yuh. Why, you—" Yuma launched into some of the most colorful expressions the Lone Ranger, still outside the cave, had ever heard. "Yuh tried tuh drill me," he went on. "Fer that I got every right tuh put a bullet through yer gizzard, but I ain't agoin' tuh do that. Shootin' you would be too easy fer you. Yore headin' fer somethin' aplenty worse than bein' kilt. Why, yuh even tried tuh double-cross Miss Penny, an', that's goin' too doggoned far. If yuh knowed the way that purty girl stood up in yore defense an' sassed right back at anyone that had anything tuh say ag'in yuh—but, shucks, loyalty O' that sort is somethin' yore kind wouldn't savvy."

"Yuma!" shouted the Lone Ranger from outside. "That will do." The masked man entered the cave, and Yuma, turning, noticed that he held a folded paper in his hand. "I told you that you'd stop here just long enough to get a horse, then head for town."

"Aw-w, I know," said Yuma apologetically. "I seen this old crook, though, an' I jest couldn't help poppin' off an' lettin' him know what I thought o' him."

"Well, you've said enough. Now take the horse and get started."

Yuma nodded and passed his masked ally. He dropped over the ledge and checked the cinch on a big bay that stood near Silver. It was a horse that the Lone Ranger had provided. Before he rested in the cave, after his arrival there with Bryant, he had gone to the Basin, found the animal, then saddled it and brought it here. His intention had been to use it for Bryant when the two left their cavern hideout. Now, however, Yuma needed the horse, so the masked man and Bryant would both ride Silver. Yuma mounted and called, "I'm on

my way." In another moment the cowpuncher was gone. Then the Lone Ranger moved close to Bryant. He spoke softly, "Is there anything you'd care to say to me now?" Bryant made no reply. He simply stared unblinkingly at the mask.

"Yuma was pretty hard on you," the Lone Ranger said. "I'm sorry that he acted as he did, but there is still a lot that you don't understand. Do you feel strong enough to leave here?" Bryant snarled, "I'm strong enough tuh do anything you do!"

"Good. We are going to your home in the Basin."

"Sort of nervy, ain't yuh?"

"Why?"

"Yuh won't live ten minutes after I git there amongst my men."

"We'll see about that. There are some things that I want to tell you. We'll talk about them as we ride."

"I ain't ridin' in there hog-tied."

"I'm going to untie you." It was but the work of a moment to free the old man; then the Lone Ranger aided him to his feet. Bryant tried to push away the masked man's help, but found himself unable to stand without some aid. Grumbling something about "bein' weak from loss of blood," Bryant permitted himself to be helped down the ledge and to the saddle. The Lone Ranger leaped behind him, and the two were on their way. Wallie was sitting idly on the front porch of the house when the two arrived. He leaped to his feet at the sight of Bryant riding with the masked man. The Lone Ranger already had a gun in readiness, and spoke quite casually when he saw Wallie reaching for a weapon. "I wouldn't if I were you." Wallie's hand froze to the gun butt. He didn't draw. "Where did you come from?" he demanded. Then to his uncle he said in a more fawning tone, "Uncle Bryant, I been worried sick about yuh ever since last night when yuh was shot at."

"Bryant snarled. "Yuh didn't stick around town very long tuh see what happened to me."

"But there wasn't any use hangin' around there," explained the well-dressed one. "We all seen yuh carried off on that white hoss. Right after yuh left, we found that it was Mort that that stranger killed."

"Mort?" snapped Bryant. "Is he dead?" Wallie explained the events of the previous night while he helped to ease Bryant Cavendish from the saddle to the ground. The Lone Ranger stood slightly back, letting Wallie help his uncle. His keen eyes shot quick glances in all directions. The Lone Ranger saw men going casually about their various tasks, but he also saw men who seemed to

have no tasks. At least six of these stood idly about, each one, he knew, watching him intently, waiting for a signal from Bryant Cavendish. His life wouldn't be worth much if the command to capture him were given. He dared not relax his vigilance for a split second.

"We'll go into the house," he told Wallie. "I'll follow you to Bryant's own bedroom. Get him into bed; he's pretty tired. I'll take care of him when he's there." Wallie started to object, but Bryant cut him off shortly. "Do what he says!" The three crossed the porch and entered the large living room. The masked man noticed that the cordwood, the chair, and the table still made a brace between the beam of the ceiling and the trapdoor in the floor. Bryant asked about the room's upset condition. Wallie said, "I'll tell yuh about that later, Uncle Bryant. First of all we want tuh get yuh in bed where yuh c'n rest up."

"You'll tell me now," barked Bryant. "I want tuh know what's been done tuh this yere room." The Lone Ranger stood at the closed door while Wallie told, as briefly as possible, about the capture of the outlaws by the masked man and their subsequent guarding by Tonto. He explained that he had found the Indian on guard when he came in, and that between Tonto and Penelope he had been told the entire story. "I didn't have any idea," he said, "that we had killers on the payroll here. I never had much to do with the runnin' of things, you know."

"Yuh would have," retorted Bryant, "if yuh spent more time here an' less time in Red Oak saloons."

"I guess it must have been Vince an' Mort that hired those men," continued Wallie in a placating manner, "but we'll see that they're taken care of, now that we know who they are." Bryant Cavendish "h'mphed," then demanded, "where's Penny?"

"Oh, I told you last night, Uncle Bryant, that she was to go to Red Oak with the kids an' stay with that woman I lined up there."

"I didn't say it'd be all right fer her tuh go. I told yuh tuh find some female that'd come here an' take care of the kids!"

"But I thought—"

"Never mind what yuh thought. How'd Penny get tuh Red Oak?"

"Well, she seemed to put a lot o' trust in that Indian, an' he was willin' to drive her there with the buckboard, so I let him do it. They left at daybreak, takin' the kids with 'em." Wallie looked at Bryant as if anticipating an outburst because he'd permitted the girl to leave the Basin in an Indian's care, but Bryant simply nodded. "I reckon," he said softly, "Penelope must have passed right by me. Wonder why she didn't say somethin' when I yelled. The redskin heard

me; why didn't Penelope?" His question was not answered. He leaned heavily on the railing of the staircase while Wallie walked beside him with the masked man close behind.

A window in the hallway on the second floor looked out toward the corral. The Lone Ranger glanced in that direction and saw the cowhands, their work ignored, converging on the ranch house. He noticed also that their hands were on the butts of their holstered six-guns. He had noticed something else that didn't diminish his apprehension. The furniture and firewood that he had placed to block any attempt to leave the cellar vault had been moved since his last visit. True, the table still rested on the trapdoor, but in a slightly different position. When Bryant finally entered his bedroom, the Lone Ranger closed the door and stood just to one side.

He studied every detail of the big room while Wallie helped old Bryant get into the heavy oak bed at the far wall. The room was well equipped with furniture. There were three large comfortable-looking chairs, a big round table in the center of the room, a desk against one wall, and the usual bedroom equipment of commode, pitcher, and basin. The desk was something to behold. It seemed to have half a hundred pigeonholes, each one of which bulged to the bursting point with folded papers. There was a curious thing about it: in some of the small compartments the papers were tucked in neatly, while in others the assorted documents were jammed in with what appeared to be a careless haste. Another point was that the sloppy-looking pigeonholes were all at one end of the desk. The masked man made a mental note to have a closer look at the desk at his earliest opportunity.

Wallie pulled a counterpane from the foot of the bed and covered Bryant. "Reckon you'll be all right now, Uncle," he said consolingly. "If there's anything more that I c'n do—"

"There ain't," barked Bryant. Wallie looked at the tall man with the mask. "I'll speak to you in the hall," the Lone Ranger said. Willie said, "Right."

"You lead the way." Wallie opened the door and went out with the masked man close behind.

"There are a lot of things," the Lone Ranger said when the door had been closed, "that I must explain to you, Cavendish. You're no doubt wondering about the mask I'm wearing. I'll tell you this much about who I am. I'm a friend of the Indian you found here."

"I know that much," said Wallie.

"I came here to find out who directed the murder of those Texas Rangers who were killed in the Gap. You probably have heard that someone wearing moccasins attended to their burial." The other nodded. "You've probably guessed by this time that the man who buried them was that same Indian. Well, that's

the truth. Those men I locked in the basement of this house, of course, had a hand in the massacre, but there was someone who gave them their instructions."

"Might have been Mort or Vince," suggested Wallie.

"It might have been, yes, but I doubt it. They wouldn't run things in such a high-handed way without being told to do so by the boss of the outfit."

"You mean Uncle Bryant?"

"He's the owner of this ranch, and all the different brands that are used here are recorded in his name. I understand that he isn't the type to let someone else boss anything he owns."

Wallie mused for a moment. "But Bryant ain't—" He didn't finish his remark.

"Wasn't it Bryant himself who helped your brother escape from jail last night in Red Oak?"

"Why should he?" argued the other. "He's the one that turned Mort over to the law."

"He turned him over to the law, because Mort was a murderer and Yuma knew it. That act on Bryant's part would remove him from suspicion. Yet someone helped Mort escape!" Wallie said, "All this is sure surprisin' news to me, stranger. I don't know just what to think about it."

"I'm telling you," continued the Lone Ranger, "so you can be ready to tell anything you know when the law men come."

"Law men?"

"Yuma is bringing them. He's also bringing a warrant for the arrest of Bryant Cavendish."

"Arrest? He can't be arrested on suspicions like yours! No law man would jail an old man on anything as flimsy as that!"

"I didn't explain," said the masked man slowly. "Yuma is charging Bryant with attempted murder! That will be enough to jail him! In the meantime, you'll do well to get your own story straight!"

"Me?"

"You!"

"B-but, stranger," faltered Wallie, "I—I don't know anything about the things that go on around here. I'm hardly ever here myself. I don't like the place. I spend as much time in Red Oak as I can."

The masked man gripped the other's upper arm. He was a little bit surprised to find the muscles beneath the fine shirt hard and firm, not flabby as Wallie's disposition and habits indicated. "Just remember this," he said: "the mere fact that men like Sawtell, Lonergan, Rangoon, and Lombard are working here is going to call for a lot of explanation. Every one of those four has a substantial reward on his head. You'd better be ready to tell all you know. It will take a lot from you to convince the law men you aren't associated with this gang."

"I've got nothin' to hide," said Wallie. "I'll tell all I know, but that ain't much. Vince may know a few things, but me, I never hang around the Basin." The Lone Ranger nodded. "Very well, then, but remember what I told you." He was about to re-enter Bryant's room, but Wallie halted him.

"What do you want?" asked the Ranger.

"You said somethin' about cattle-stealin' around here."

"A lot of cattle has been stolen from ranches around this part of the country." The masked man explained the means that had been used to rebrand the stolen cattle in the Basin, give the burns a chance to heal, then sell the stock with brands that suited bills of sale. He told of the trail down Thunder Mountain that had been used for shuttling cattle into and out of the Basin. Wallie seemed genuinely amazed to learn that things of this sort had gone on beneath his unsuspecting nose.

"You plan to stay here until the law men come, is that it?" asked Wallie when the masked man finished. "Yes. I want to have a talk with Bryant. Perhaps I can persuade him to tell all he knows. It will save him a lot of trouble to talk first."

"He won't talk," replied Wallie. "I don't know about that."

"I never knew a more close-lipped, stubborn man in my life. No amount of threatenin' could loosen his tongue. He'd put up with all the torture an Apache could concoct an' never say a word."

"Nevertheless, he's not a fool. He's a shrewd man, and his whole life has been made up of weighing the odds, then playing his cards. I have a hunch that he'll realize the advantage of telling all he can."

"Why?" "If he doesn't, he'll be in no position to compromise with the law and he'll spend the rest of his life in jail for trying to murder Yuma. If he's willing to talk, he might get off scot-free and be allowed to guide the future of his niece." Wallie nodded slowly. "Maybe," he said, "you're right. I'll be downstairs to see that those crooks don't get out of the vault. If there's anything you want, just holler."

"Thanks." The Lone Ranger returned to Bryant's room.

CHAPTER XXV - WHO IS ANDREW MUNSON?

The masked man paused at the door until he heard Wallie reach the first floor of the big house. He waited another moment, listening intently, but heard nothing. He wondered where the men were whom he'd seen approach the house with guns drawn, and what they were doing at the moment. Then he closed the door and would have locked it, but he found no key.

Bryant Cavendish lay on the bed, flat on his back. His mouth was half-open and his eyes were closed. He slept noisily, breathing with a throaty sound. The old man had been through a strenuous ordeal. The Lone Ranger stepped to the bed and placed sensitive fingers on the pulse in Bryant's wrist. The heartbeat was firm and steady. The sleep, apparently, was normal sleep brought on by sheer exhaustion, not abnormal unconsciousness.

"Just as well," the masked man muttered. "If he'll stay asleep for a little while I'll have a look at that desk."

The desk was old and rather battered. It was a huge affair of oak with many drawers beneath the two-inch-thick top. Rising from the back of the desk there was a section divided into many squares. Filled with papers, as these pigeonholes were, it closely resembled an overworked post office. The sections on the right were neatly ordered, the papers folded evenly and tucked in edgewise.

The masked man glanced about the room. Meticulous order was apparent everywhere. On the dresser a brush, comb, a large knife and a smaller knife, and a razor were neatly arranged. A shelf above the washstand held a shaving

mug. The brush, instead of being in the mug in sloppy fashion, had been rinsed, and stood on end. The rest of the room was equally neat. The ordered compartments of the desk were, then, as Bryant had fixed them. The lefthand pigeonholes were otherwise.

Papers were jammed in these without regard for order. Some were folded, others just stuffed in; some compartments bulged, while others were barely half-filled; some papers were on edge, some lay flat. The condition of things told a story of a search that had been started at the extreme left and continued methodically, one compartment at a time, until the object of the search was found. The Lone Ranger reasoned that the object, whatever it was, had been in the last disordered pigeonhole.

He glanced at Bryant and found him still asleep and snoring. He pulled papers from the pigeonhole and spread them on the desk top. A few receipts of recent date; an envelope with a penciled address on it; a bill of sale for twenty head of cattle; a clipping from a St. "Jo" paper that dealt with a railroad that was contemplated in the West; a pamphlet which described in glowing terms the curative qualities of Doctor Blaine's Golden Tonic; a sheet of heavy paper, folded twice across, and labeled, "Bryant Cavendish, His Last Will and Testament."

The Lone Ranger replaced everything else, then drew another legal document from the pocket of his shirt. He unfolded this, and laid it by the will. The writing in the two was identical; Lonergan's handwriting. The masked man had known there would have to be a will of some sort to accompany the agreement which the natural heirs had signed forswearing their rights to the Cavendish property. He had been anxious to know the name of the individual chosen as heir.

Penelope and her cousins were mentioned in the will. Each was to receive ten dollars in cash. A lawyer's foresight had, doubtless, dictated the mention of them, so that there would be no complaint that Bryant had forgotten relatives in preparing the will. The balance of the estate, after all just obligations had been paid, was to go to a man named Andrew Munson. The document described Andrew Munson as a man to whom Bryant felt a heavy obligation. It told how Munson must be identified, and omitted no detail. Bryant Cavendish had signed his name at the bottom, and in the proper places there were signatures of witnesses. Until such time as Andrew Munson could be found, the Basin ranch was to be managed by Bryant's four nephews or, if all four were not alive, by the survivors.

"Who," the masked man asked himself, "is Andrew Munson?" He had never heard the name before. There might be some reference to Munson in the papers in the desk, but the search through these would have to wait until a later time. There was something far more urgent that must be done at once.

It took several minutes to waken old Bryant Cavendish. When he was fully awake and growling his complaints at being roused, the Lone Ranger sat beside him on the bed. "Get fully awake, Cavendish," he said.

Bryant squinted in the light that came from the windows. "Hurts my eyes," he complained in a somewhat sleepy voice.

The masked man crossed the room and drew the heavy draperies together, cutting out most of the light and making the room quite dim. "Better?"

"I heard your voice before," Bryant said. "Who are yuh?"

"We rode from Red Oak together last night, Cavendish. I was with you in a cave until this morning—don't you remember?"

"I seem tuh. How long I been sleepin'?"

"Only about half an hour. I'll get you a drink of water. You've got to get wide-awake and listen to me!"

"I've listened aplenty. I'm done with it. Now get out of here, an' lemme alone. Where is Penelope?"

The masked man poured water from the pitcher and held it to the old man's lips while he explained, "Penelope is in Red Oak. She went there this morning with the children. My friend, the Indian, went with her."

Bryant drank half the water, then pushed the cup aside. He rubbed his eyes, then studied the masked man, squinting slightly. "I reckon," he said, "I remember things now. So much has happened in the past couple o' days I can't somehow keep things straight."

"Are you wide-awake now, Bryant?"

"Course I am," retorted the old man in a nettled voice. "What d'you want?"

"I took your will from the desk. I want you to take a look at it." A paper was extended toward Bryant. "Is there enough light in here for you to see it?"

"I don't need tuh see it, I know what's in it!"

"Examine it anyway."

"Fer what?"

"See if it's just the way you want it!"

"I've got fed up with all these fool stunts of yores, stranger. Now, for the last time, will yuh leave me be?"

The Lone Ranger found it difficult to control his anger. Before him, sitting upright in the bed, was the man who was indirectly responsible for the murder

of those Texas Rangers, whose graves were in the Gap; for Becky's death; the stabbing of Gimlet; possibly even of Rangoon and Mort. And this man was asking to be left alone! The masked man's clenched fists trembled while he fought for self-control. He must, above all, keep his voice down. He leaned forward.

"I want to know," he said softly as he put the will in his pocket, "who Andrew Munson is."

Bryant said, "Who?"

The Lone Ranger repeated the name.

Cavendish pondered. His eyes held a faraway expression as he gazed at a corner of the ceiling.

"Answer me, Cavendish—who is Andrew Munson?"

Bryant turned slowly, and looked at the mask. His frown was deep, and his voice without emotion. "I never heard the name before."

The Lone Ranger felt something in him snap. It seemed as if this stubbornness in Bryant was more than he could bear without an outburst! The strain of the past few days; the fight against his wounds, against fatigue and pain; the bitterness of seeing good friends die ... all of these things seemed to roll together in a choking bitter mass that made him speechless. His hands reached out and gripped Cavendish. "You," he whispered in a hoarse, tense voice, "must be shown!"

With strength born of desperation, the Lone Ranger lifted Bryant as if he weighed nothing, and hauled him from the bed. His unanswered question was ringing in his brain.

"Who is Andrew Munson!"

CHAPTER XXVI - DISASTER GETS ORGANIZED

As Wallie descended the stairs after this talk with the masked man, his nonchalance crystallized into a grim resolve that transformed his personality. He paused at the bottom of the flight and glanced up. The enigmatic man with the mask apparently had returned to Bryant's bedroom. Then Wallie opened the front door and stepped to the verandah. Half a dozen of the ranch hands were there with ill-concealed curiosity.

Wallie spoke softly but without a trace of the careless ease that marked his style at other times. "Go back to whatever you were doin'," he ordered. "If you're needed, we'll send for you."

"But who was that masked man with Bryant?" asked one of the men.

"None of your business," retorted Wallie in a surly voice. "Get to work an' you'll be sent for later." He turned to another man. "Has Gimlet been buried yet?"

The lanky individual addressed shook his head slowly. "We jest tossed a blanket over him," he said. "We warn't shore what yore plans was. He's still in the bunkhouse."

Wallie nodded. "Leave him there for the time being." He swung through the door and headed for the upset living room. Had Penelope seen Wallie in his present mood, she would have revised her opinion of him in a hundred ways. He walked with a purposeful air instead of the familiar sauntering gait; his

eyes, generally half-closed in boredom, were wide and divided by a perpendicular frown-crease on his forehead. And those eyes were hard. His hands were clenched with such intensity that the well-cared-for fingernails bit into the palms ... hard fists in place of hands that strummed soft tunes of romance on a guitar. The soft, full-lipped mouth was gone, and in its place there was the same hard line that Bryant Cavendish showed when angry.

Wallie was indeed a different person. A fop no longer; instead, a man of purpose with cruel ruthlessness in every feature. He went through the living room without a pause and halted only when he reached the kitchen. He closed the door without a slam.

Jeb sat with a woebegone expression on a heavy chair. Sawtell, as bland as ever, stood beside him, holding a heavy gun in one hand. At the sight of Wallie, Sawtell spoke. "He started to make some complaints a little while ago, an' I tapped him on the head. I don't think we'll hear any more from him."

Wallie glanced at his lean brother. There was a cut somewhere beneath the stringy hair on the left side of Jeb's skull. Blood, seeping from it, had dribbled down his cheek and stained his collar. Jeb's eyes held an unvoiced but pathetic plea. They resembled those of a hog-tied calf suffering the torment of a branding iron.

Wallie said, "Better gag an' tie him. I'll decide later what's to be done."

Sawtell nodded, dropped his pistol in a holster, and proceeded with the tying, while Jeb, who knew that a voiced complaint would simply mean another crack on the head, made no resistance.

Lonergan sat on the edge of the kitchen table, casually working on his fingernails with a carving knife. He glanced up, a question mark in his expression.

There had been two others locked in the vault beneath the living room. They, too, were present in the kitchen. Lombard and Vince, sullen, and dripping muttered curses as well as sweat, stood side by side, leaning against the wall with half-filled whisky glasses in their hands.

"Are you sure," began Wallie, "none of you knows who that masked man is?" He glanced from one to another, receiving negative headshakes.

"All I know about him," grumbled Lombard, "is that I spent a night in that cold, wet cellar, an' I'm goin' to square it with him."

"What about me?" snapped Vince. "My joints'll ache fer a week after las' night."

"You," said Wallie, looking at Lombard, "stand at the foot of the stairs, an' make sure he don't come out of Bryant's room. Vince, you get close to the

window an' keep watch on the Gap. Yuma will be here some time today with a warrant for Bryant's arrest, an' law men to act on the warrant."

"Why me? What's the matter with Sawtell or Lonergan?"

Wallie didn't reply, but his cold-eyed gaze was quite enough. Vince grumbled his way to the window, as if he resented being ordered about by his own brother in the same fashion that ordinary outlaws were commanded. He dragged a chair to the window and sat down.

"This'll do for the time," Sawtell suggested, as he tied the last knot in the ropes about Jeb's arms. "Now what'll we do with him?"

"Leave him where he is until I finish speaking, and then we'll decide later what we'll do with him. I told you that already."

"He knows too much," said Vince, "an' he's too dumb to be any good to us. Why worry about him?"

"Who," said Wallie, "is worrying?"

"What about that masked man? What was it you said about Yuma comin' with the law?" It was Lonergan, the lawyer-gambler, speaking.

Wallie explained briefly how Yuma's hat had been shot at by Bryant; how both Yuma and the man with the mask were convinced that Bryant Cavendish was the leader of all that went on in the Basin.

"That works out fine for us," he said. "We may have to lay low for a little while, but we've been needin' a rest anyhow. We'll sell off some of the cattle we've got here now, but wait till things cool off before we bring in any more." He went into detail, explaining how the masked man's plan was to persuade Bryant to confess before he went to jail. "And he figures," he continued, "on lettin' the law take you men back."

Sawtell shifted his weight uneasily, and Lonergan laid down the carving knife. "There's a rope just a little too tight for my neck waitin' for me if I go back to Red Oak," Sawtell said.

"None of you are goin' back," snapped Wallie. "Didn't I tell you, when I suggested that you come here and help me out, that I'd see you well protected?"

"Maybe," suggested Lonergan, "you've got some new scheme."

"I have."

"It better be good. Your idea was working out swell until Rebecca sent for the law. Then, instead of entertaining those Texas Rangers and convincing them that everything was all right here, you had to ambush them. As a lawyer, I advised against that massacre."

"I didn't ask for your advice, Lonergan."

"Well, it was a mistake to dry-gulch them anyway. That won't stop other Rangers from coming here to see what happened to them. I tell you, Wallie, there's a great big rope, speaking in the picturesque way of the story-writers, around all of us, an' that rope is bein' hauled in tight."

"Wallie barked in a sharp reply. "If you'll button your lip for a few minutes I'll tell you how everything has worked out to put us in the clear."

"You weren't satisfied with that massacre," the lawyer went on accusingly. "You had to kill Rangoon, then Gimlet, and last night, Mort."

"My policy," replied Wallie, his voice cold with suppressed anger, "is to leave no loose ends. Rangoon couldn't be relied on. Gimlet already knew a few things, an' thought a lot more. Mort would have squealed his yellow head off to avoid bein' hanged. As for Yuma, it's a shame he didn't get a couple of slugs where they'd do the most good for us."

"I don't know why he was hired to work here anyway," said Lonergan. "He wasn't like the rest of the men."

"Bryant himself hired Yuma, an' who knows why. Anyway, it's the fact that Yuma is bringin' the law that'll put us in the clear."

"In the clear on what?" asked Lonergan.

"I don't know why I take so much back talk from you, Lonergan," said Wallie.

"I do. It's because you wouldn't have a ghost of a show in handling things after Bryant dies, without my legal talents." The lawyer studied his fingernails with exaggerated concern, and again picked up the carving knife. "Now what is this big scheme of yours that's to put us in the clear? My own suggestion would be to go to Bryant's room and get the drop on this masked man, then —"

"I'll do the talking from now on," Wallie interrupted. "In the first place, there's the murder of Rangoon to be accounted for. Well, that masked man and the Indian friend that went to town with Penny were both in the clearing. All right, we blame Rangoon's death on them. As for Gimlet, Yuma had a lot better chance to kill him than I did. It's known that Yuma was on the ranch at the time. But no one knows that I came back from Red Oak by the Thunder Mountain route, knifed Gimlet, an' went back to town. We tell the law men it's Yuma who killed Gimlet. I'll accuse him of it when he gets here, and let him try to deny it. Penny herself, if need be, will have to say that Yuma was here at the time."

Lonergan nodded. "So far," he said, "you're doin' good—go on."

"As for Mort's death—that's easy to blame on the masked man. Everyone in Red Oak has already accused him of murderin' Mort. Everyone in town heard him yell to that white horse of his when he carried Bryant away. Why, public sentiment is with us! There ain't anyone in town that wouldn't blame the masked man for killing, not only Mort, but Bryant as well!"

"It sounds swell to me," admired Sawtell, "all but for the fact that this masked man an' Bryant are both upstairs and livin'."

"That's a detail that's goin' to be taken care of pronto," stated Wallie. "My story, which Vince will back up, being that none of you others dare show yourselves, is that the masked man brought Bryant here, dead. I shot him for it after a big fight." Wallie looked proudly at Lonergan. "Now what's the matter with that?"

Lonergan pondered and then said, "Those two are still alive. That's the only trouble."

"It won't take long to remedy that. We go up to Bryant's[232] room, burst in, and start shootin'. Get Bryant and get the masked man. I took the trouble to bring the key with me, so the door won't be locked. By lookin' through the keyhole I'll make sure where the two of them are, an' then when we go into the room we won't be shootin' blind. We can't miss."

"The more I hear about it," said Sawtell, "the better it sounds. It'll be a big relief to have Bryant out of our way for keeps. He's been a nuisance around here."

"We had to let him live until we had things arranged," explained Wallie, "but now there's no more need of him."

"It'll not only get rid of Bryant," added Sawtell, "it'll clear up the murders around here. I suppose you've got some way all worked out to blame the killin' of those Texas Rangers on him?"

"The masked man will be blamed for those. It's well known that he an' that Indian are pards. Their footprints are both up there on Thunder Mountain where the buzzards are cleanin' off Rangoon's bones. The Indian's footprints are near the graves of the Rangers. Any law man could put an' two together an' get the answer that the masked man an' Indian killed 'em. If the Redskin tries to deny it, who'll listen to him against the evidence?"

Lonergan laid down the knife methodically and slid from the edge of the table to his feet. Wallie looked at him defiantly, as if daring the lawyer to find a flaw in the plans.

There was a mixture of surprise and admiration in the way Lonergan looked at Wallie. "I didn't think," he said, "you had it in you. I'd be surprised if it won't work."

Wallie's deep-rooted respect for the adroit brain of the lawyer made him glow with pleasure at a compliment from that man.

"As I see it," said Lonergan, "there's just one little flaw in the plans."

"What's that?" demanded Wallie.

"The story you figure on telling won't account for a lot of bullet holes around that bedroom of your uncle. Have you got a way around that worked out?"

"Of course. We tell the law that Bryant was shot in front of the house and that I shot the masked man for it in the same place. Both corpses will be on the porch, an' there won't be any reason to go into the bedroom until after we have the chance to clean it up."

"That," said Lonergan, "will do it."

"I've had a hunch," contributed Vince from his post at the window, "that Bryant's been suspectin' things for some time. I'll be glad to see him done away with. With him an' Penny out of here, we won't have to be so careful about every move we make." Wallie nodded. "After the law is satisfied," he said, "we'll go on just as we have been. Vince will take charge of things while I'm tomcattin' around Red Oak an' playin' the part of a girl-crazy Romeo while I listen for news about cattle ranches that are just invitin' visitors like us." The leader of the group sketched a few details of his plan, then said, "I want all of you to go upstairs with me. Keep your guns drawn an' keep still. We'll take Lombard as we go by him. When the fireworks are over with, me an' Vince will wait for Yuma to fetch the law men, an' the rest of you can hide. Now put Jeb down in the vault, then fix the room up as it should be. While you're doin' that I'll tell Lombard the plans, an' then we'll all go up to Bryant's room."

Jeb was still dazed from the ugly blow Sawtell had given him. He was limp and unresisting as the men picked him up bodily, hands and feet tied tightly, and carried him to the living room. They dropped him on the floor and replaced things where they belonged. Sawtell tossed the hunk of firewood to one side, then handed down the chair from its place on the table top. Lonergan kicked the chair toward a wall, while Sawtell stepped to the floor and hauled away the table. It was Vince who opened the trapdoor, then rolled his brother Jeb into the opening. He laughed as he heard Jeb's body strike the hard-dirt floor below. "Don't get intuh no mischief down there," he called; then he closed the door and pulled the rug in place to conceal it.

Meanwhile Wallie was with Lombard at the foot of the stairs. Lombard was grinning and nodded as the others joined the couple. He drew his gun and spun the cylinder to check it. A moment later, after a few last, whispered instructions from Wallie, the five were ready to go upstairs with disaster for the Lone Ranger.

CHAPTER XXVII - GUNS TALK BACK

The murder-bent quintet went up the stairs like Indians stalking single file through wooded land. Each man carried his gun in his left hand and braced himself with his right against the wall. They stayed as close to that wall as possible to minimize the creaking of the stairs. The only sound was a faint, leathery whisper from the dusty boots. Wallie cursed inwardly at his lack of foresight in not having his men go stocking-footed to the double murder.

Wallie was in the lead, Vince in the rear. In this order they gained the upstairs hall. Any apprehensions Wallie might have had about the squeaking boots were dispelled as he drew close to Bryant's door. A resonant voice, undoubtedly that of the masked man, was speaking. Wallie felt no qualms of guilt or conscience at the cold-blooded ruthlessness of his plans. He hadn't the slightest intention of giving the men who were marked for execution a chance to defend themselves. The code of Western fair play was missing from Wallie's personality. This was to be no duel, but simply the extinction of two men whose deaths had become essential to his plans. Wallie halted at the closed but unlocked door and motioned Lonergan and Lombard past him. As the leader faced the door those two were on his left, while Vince and Sawtell, guns now shifted to their right hands, stood upon his right. All but Wallie were balanced on the balls of their feet, tense and ready to charge through the door, but Wallie hesitated. He could hear the masked man's voice, with a vibrant quality carrying through the door. He could hear, distinctly, each word that was said. The masked man was scolding old Bryant Cavendish.

Wallie crouched and placed one eye close to the keyhole. The room, he saw, was dimly lighted. It was difficult to see details. The blankets were mounded on the bed as if they'd been pulled over Bryant's big body. On the far side of the bed Wallie could make out a white sombrero, and judged that to be where the masked man sat while he conducted the one-sided conversation. Wallie now knew just where he should direct his men to fire when he threw open the door. He hesitated, listening to what was being said inside.

"You're the most unreasonably stubborn old fool I've ever known, Cavendish." It was the masked man speaking. "It's high time for you to drop this false pride of yours; admit you've grown old, let someone help you.

"Cavendish, all these murders are yours. I know you aren't the killer, personally, but none of them could possibly have happened if you hadn't been so foolishly stubborn! You'd never admit that you found it hard to walk. You thought you hid that fact, but you didn't! You didn't fool anyone at all. Then when your eyes began to fail you, you tried to hide that fact too. Why, right now, you're so nearly blind that you have to *feel* your way." Wallie heard a low-toned response from his uncle. Then the masked man continued.

"All of those nephews of yours realized that you not only were incapable of getting about, but that you couldn't even see what went on. They felt secure in doing whatever they pleased, so they organized a regular crime ring here in the Basin. They replaced all of your former hands with crooks whom they selected. They let it be known in the right places that this Basin would be a safe hideout for men the law was looking for. You couldn't see what your cowhands looked like, so you had no cause to distrust them. You wouldn't go to a doctor and have your eyes treated and your sight improved, because you wanted to conceal your condition." Wallie reasoned that inasmuch as neither of the two beyond the door was to survive much longer, he might as well hear what else this incalculable masked man knew.

"Penelope tried her best to find reasons for your unconcern over the ways things were going here. She thought more of you than you deserved. She tried to convince herself that you were not aware of things, and tried to find out if blindness was the reason. She defended you when Yuma turned against you; and what was her reward for that loyalty? You turned against her, the same as you did against those graceless cousins. She was made to sign away her rights just as they were. Don't interrupt, Cavendish—I've more to say. Yuma felt that as long as you were alive, that girl would be guarded and protected. How wrong he was! But that was what he thought, and when I captured him he tried to convince me that he was the leader of these Basin killers. He was ready to spend the rest of his life as a fugitive in hiding, and keep the law off your neck. When I showed him the document that Penelope had been made to sign, he realized that he'd made a mistake. He saw then that the girl he loved could look for little enough happiness or security through you.

Who, in the name of Heaven, is this Andrew Munson? What do you owe him that you'd deprive Penelope of any future comfort, in his favor?" Wallie strained to hear what Bryant's reply would be, but there was none. In the brief pause, he heard the heavy, emotional breathing of the masked man.

"It wasn't until this morning that I learned some truths," the masked man continued. "I knew that someone had slipped into this Basin and murdered Gimlet, because the killer rode within ten yards of me, but I didn't know who he was. Tonto was halfway up Thunder Mountain when this same man went by. It was too dark there for the Indian to identify him when he killed Rangoon. Then he went on to Red Oak, where he let Mort out of jail with instructions to kill you in your hotel room. You know what happened there. I told you how I shot him in the leg, and how he was later stabbed to death. Since then, I've learned *who the killer is*!

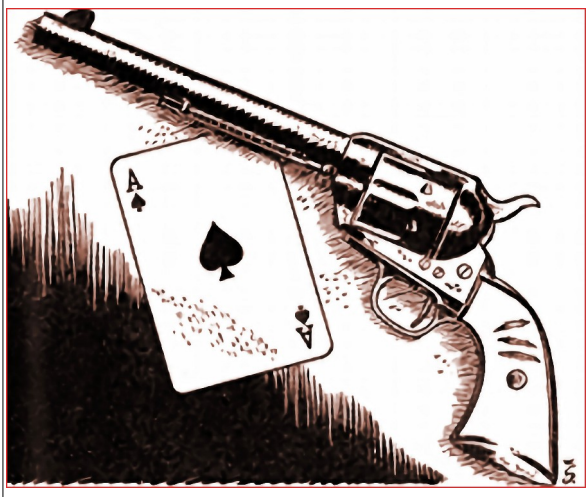
"I told you about Tonto. He was here, waiting for the riders to come back from Red Oak. The trail from Red Oak is on hard ground, as you know. The trail over Thunder Mountain is marshy in a lot of places. The loam there is soft and black, and different from anything that could be found on the trail through the Gap. Well, Tonto watched when each horse came into the corral. He found one, just one horse, Cavendish, that had black loam caked to the fetlocks. He gave me the name of the man who rode and owned that horse, in a note which he left at the cave. *That man is your nephew, Wallie!*" Wallie, listening, frowned heavily, and thanked his lucky stars that this man with such a keen and logical mind was to be killed. He would prove a dangerous adversary if left alive.

"You don't believe me," the masked man said, "you won't let yourself believe, or trust anyone, but I'll *prove* Wallie is what I've told you. If I can prove that, will you talk?" Wallie had heard enough. "Come on!" he cried, and threw the door wide open. Lombard and Sawtell plunged into the room, and dropped to one knee while they opened fire. Lonergan and Vince were close behind, firing over them, while Wallie remained in back. Guns crashed deafeningly in the confines of the room. The white hat near the bed became a thing alive, leaping across the room in crazy circles. The mound of blankets on the bed became a shaking mass as bullet after bullet bored deep. A score of shots roared in the blink of an eye. Then, back talk, in the voices of six-shooters, came from a corner of the room. Sawtell's gun jumped from his hand as if by magic. His fingers were suddenly a bloody mass, at which the killer stared in stupefaction. More flames lanced from the corner, and Lombard's extended gun arm snapped as a forty-five slug tore through flesh and bone between the wrist and elbow. Sawtell felt no pain in the heat of battle. Instinctive gunman that he was, he fell flat upon his belly, jerking out a second revolver with his left hand. Loud snarls and curses came from pain-maddened Lombard, while Sawtell took careful aim. He steadied his weapon at a point directly between the eyeslits of the mask. His finger tensed upon the trigger. Then, suddenly,

his arm dropped, his gun unfired. He went limp and slumped. In his forehead there was a tiny hole, but the back of his head was an awful sight where a soft-nosed bullet had gouged out his skull. Half-blind Bryant Cavendish fired at sounds with an instinct that was supersensitive. Somehow the old man had found one of his guns, and cried aloud in savage hate as he rocketed shot after shot toward the doorway. "They're all ag'in me," he cried out. "I'll show 'em I don't need sight! I can locate skunks by smell." His gun whammed again, and death spat at the doorway. Wallie screamed his orders. "In the corner—shoot 'em—drill 'em!" He pushed from behind at the instant that the lawyer Lonergan took a bullet from the masked man's gun on the hand, and one from Bryant's big revolver in the belly. He pitched forward, and fell across the writhing form of Lombard. Shrill yells and cries of pain rose far above Wallie's livid curses.

The Lone Ranger snatched the gun from Bryant's hand. "No more shooting," he cried. He leaped toward the doorway, head low, and charged. Vince had swung to face the surprise counterattack. His gun blazed, but the Lone Ranger was beneath the slug. He crashed into Vince with such force that the runty killer was fairly lifted off his feet and tossed across the room, while his gun was jarred out of his hand. Wallie, knowing his life depended on the fight, scrambled up from the floor. The thought of losing made him frantic as he swung his empty gun in a vicious blow at the Lone Ranger. The blow struck the Lone Ranger on the bandaged shoulder. A sudden stab of pain like a white-hot iron gripped his side as Wallie followed up his advantage. Still clutching the heavy revolver, he rammed it muzzle first into the masked man's chest. The Lone Ranger couldn't breathe. The blow must have broken at least one rib, possibly more. He felt his legs caving beneath him, while his brain fought valiantly against the dizziness that threatened to engulf him. He threw both arms about Wallie and locked his hands behind his adversary's neck. He was falling, and helpless to prevent it. He was barely conscious of the fact that Wallie kept driving more blows to his stomach; blows that were too short to have much power behind them. Close to his ear, he heard the other's voice as a meaningless jumble of hissing syllables. Somehow the Lone Ranger's weight threw Wallie off his balance too. The masked man had the fighter's heart that dictates action after the mind has ceased functioning. A mighty heave—a wrench that split the half-healed wound wide open. Still falling—it seemed that time stood still—and split seconds were like hours—and then a crash. The masked man's fall was padded by the body of the man he fell on. His superhuman effort had thrown Wallie beneath him as the two went down. Wallie's head smacked hard against the floor. Now Vince had a gun, was on his feet and coming close. His ugly face looked like a leering demon's as he raised his gun. The Lone Ranger rolled, and as he did so, drew his extra weapon. Two guns spoke as one, their muzzles so close that the flames were intermingled. To the Lone Ranger, close to acrid fumes and scorching flame, it seemed that flames had burst into the room. And then—oblivion.

CHAPTER XXVIII - WALLIE LEADS AN ACE



"—another gun full-loaded with six soft-nosed slugs that'll blast yer brains clean outen the back of yer blasted head if yuh so much as make a move."

These were the first words the Lone Ranger heard as he recovered consciousness. His body was a mass of pain, and each breath brought a stabbing sensation in his chest. He realized, but dimly, that Bryant Cavendish was speaking. He didn't know to whom.

"Yer stayin' right here till Yuma's had aplenty o' time tuh git here with the law an' if he ain't come by sundown I'm blastin' the life out of yuh anyhow!"Obviously Bryant had the situation well in hand. The masked man edged painfully to one side and tried to focus his eyes on the scene about him. The bedroom air was heavy with the smoke of gunfire, and the light was dim.

The floor resembled a battlefield. Wallie lay where he had fallen, still unconscious. A pool of red surrounded Sawtell's lifeless body. Lonergan rolled upon the floor, clutching his stomach and moaning hideously. The lawyer was dying, that was obvious, but dying in the most horrible and painful way a man can die by bullets. Lombard sat in a chair, his right arm hanging limp and dripping red. His face was drawn with pain, but he was silent. Vince alone seemed to have escaped lightly. He had a handkerchief, a dirty blue one, wrapped about one hand, but this didn't prevent his holding both hands above his shoulders. The masked man struggled to his feet and almost staggered his way to the washstand. He somehow managed to splash water from a pitcher to the basin, then scooped handfuls of it to his face.

"Yuh all right?" Bryant Cavendish demanded.

"I—I'm all right. I don't know just why—I—I thought—"

"Save yer breath till yuh got enough of it tuh talk with. I c'n see good enough tuh keep these skunks covered. Yuh shot Vince's gun outen his hand. I thought fer sure you was a goner." The Lone Ranger heard a soft moan and turned to see Wallie recovering from the blow he sustained when his head struck the floor. Still unsteady on his feet, the masked man carried water in the cup and threw it on the other's face, then he joined Bryant Cavendish after regaining his guns. He sat on the floor and reloaded. For the first time he was aware of the freshly opened shoulder wound. The blood was soaking through his shirt. His chest, too, bothered him, but there were other things of far greater importance than his personal condition.

Wallie was sitting up with a dazed look in his face.

"You," barked Bryant, "git over there an' stand close tuh Vince."

Wallie obeyed slowly. Meanwhile Lonergan had ceased his cries. The Lone Ranger knew by looking at him that the man was dead. Then he heard Bryant scolding.

"I had two guns," the old man complained. "I'd o' wiped the lot o' them out, if you hadn't messed intuh things so's I couldn't shoot without prob'ly hittin' you!"

"That's just it, Bryant. I didn't want them all killed. We want them alive to talk! There are a lot of other men on this ranch and everyone has been working with these."

"Where they at now?"

"Outside the house, figuring that you and I are dead."

"Skunks," growled Bryant. Wallie appeared to have regained his composure. "What," he asked, "are your plans now?"

"Shut up an' you'll find out," snapped Bryant. "This masked man told me about you, yuh dirty double-dyed rat, but I wouldn't believe him! He told me that he'd said jest enough tuh you so you'd figger the two of us had tuh be wiped out. Then he dragged me outen my bed an' packed me in this yere corner of the room an' waited till yuh showed yer hand. I never got talked to in my hull life like I been talked to by this critter. Now he's showed you up fer what yuh are I reckon I'm due tuh do some talkin'!"

"I ain't interested," growled Wallie. "Now lookut here," broke in Vince, "I'm yer own blood relative, Uncle Bryant. I—" "Don't 'uncle' me, yuh weasel-faced runt! You was in on everything that took place. Only thing I don't savvy is where's Jeb?"

"You'd better be interested in where Penelope is," suggested Wallie. "You don't care what happens to Jeb, but if you're interested in that girl, you'd better be willin' to talk things over reasonable."

"She's in the care of that Indian," retorted Bryant, "an' a sight safer than she was around here with you crooks."

Wallie nodded. "Suit yourself."

The Lone Ranger said, "You were going to say something, Cavendish."

"I was," said Bryant, "an' still am."

The Lone Ranger rose again, feeling slightly stronger, and while Bryant talked, did what he could to dress the broken arm of Lombard.

"I got aplenty tuh explain," said Bryant. "It's as you said, I didn't want tuh let on that my eyes was bad because I knew I'd be took advantage of by everyone, so I tried tuh hide it. I told Mort that I wanted a good lawyer tuh come here an' help me make up my will. I didn't know anything about this Lonergan, except that he talked like he knew law."

"He did," said the Lone Ranger.

"I had him make out my will an' I signed it. When he read it tuh me, it sounded like I wanted it. The lyin' crook didn't say anything about anyone called Munson."

"You don't know anyone by that name?"

"No. When I told yuh I'd never heard the name, I told the truth."

"What about that other document?"

"I had Lonergan write that up, too. It's just like you said it was. I planned tuh have all these no-good nephews sign that paper. Penelope wasn't never supposed tuh sign it."

"She wasn't?" asked the Lone Ranger quickly.

"No, she wasn't supposed tuh sign that any more than a man named Munson was supposed tuh inherit my ranch. I left all I own tuh Penelope. That's how the will was supposed tuh read an' that's how Lonergan read it tuh me. When I took Mort into Red Oak last night, these skunks seen their chance tuh make Penny sign that paper. I savvy what their dirty double-crossin' scheme was. I ain't no fool. Them crooks knowed that none o' them could be named in my will without arousin' a lot of suspicion, so they put in the name of Munson. If yuh want my opinion there ain't an' never was no Andrew Munson."

"That," said the Lone Ranger, "is about the way they planned it. They knew the claimant to the Basin would never appear and they'd go on running the

place in accordance with the terms of the will and using it as they have been for the past weeks in their cattle business."

Wallie yawned in feigned boredom. "When you get through with all this talk, you'd better spend a little time deciding whether you want Penelope to live—or die!"

The Lone Ranger said, "There's one more thing we haven't learned." His voice grew flinty. "Who was in the party that ambushed those Texas Rangers?"

"What's the difference?"

"Answer me!"

"An' if I don't?" replied Wallie in a bantering tone.

The masked man stepped back a pace and drew his gun. He held it at a hip, the muzzle pointing at the stomach of the other. "You saw how Lonergan died," he said softly. "It wasn't easy to watch."

Wallie glanced at the gun, then at the masked man's face. He saw something in those steady eyes behind the mask that made him almost feel the frightful drilling of a slug in the pit of his stomach. "I—I didn't know anything about it," he said. "Mort an' Vince planned it by themselves an'—"

"Yuh squealer!" yelled Vince.

"Go on."

"Rangoon bossed the job—"

"You'd o' done it yer ownself," bellowed Vince, "if yuh hadn't been so yeller. All of us all the time had tuh take orders from you while you strutted around in fancy clothes!"

"That's what I wanted to know," the masked man said, holstering his weapon.

"That's a confession," shouted Bryant, "an' I heard it. I'll witness that in court."

"But wait," fairly shouted Wallie. "You've nothin' to gain by hangin' us! It'll just mean that Penelope dies too! You don't understand." One of the windows in the room looked out across the Basin to the Gap. The masked man had glanced toward this frequently throughout the conversation. Now he saw horsemen coming from the canyon.

"Yuma will be here in a few minutes," he said. "He's crossing the Basin now."

"Then you've got little time to decide. I made arrangements in Red Oak, like I told you last night." Wallie addressed himself to Bryant.

"There's a woman there that's agreed to take care of Penny an' those kids. I didn't say how she was goin' to take care of her! It's Breed Martin's wife!"

"Breed Martin!" Bryant roared the name. "A skunk that'll do anything includin' murder fer the price of a drink! Why you—" The old man was trembling in rage, struggling to get on his feet; his hands were working as if his fingers itched to feel Wallie's thick throat.

"That's just it," said Wallie. "I admit all you've said here, I admit it tuh prove that I was willin' to go to any lengths to have my way! I planned to be the richest man in this part of the country!" Wallie's voice was shrill and getting shriller. "I wanted every killer in this state takin' orders from me. I was goin' to control the state an' I wouldn't let the life of one girl stand between me an' what I wanted. I told that Redskin where tuh take Penelope. I described the house! He can't miss it! Two hours after she gets there, Breed an' his woman'll have everything all set to take her an' the kids south of the border, an' that'll be the last of 'em! You know well what'll happen to a girl as pretty as Penelope in some of them outlaw greaser dives!

"I told Breed an' his wife to get her out of Red Oak an' go in hidin' till they heard from me! They'll do just that! If I don't show up, they'll go on south with her."

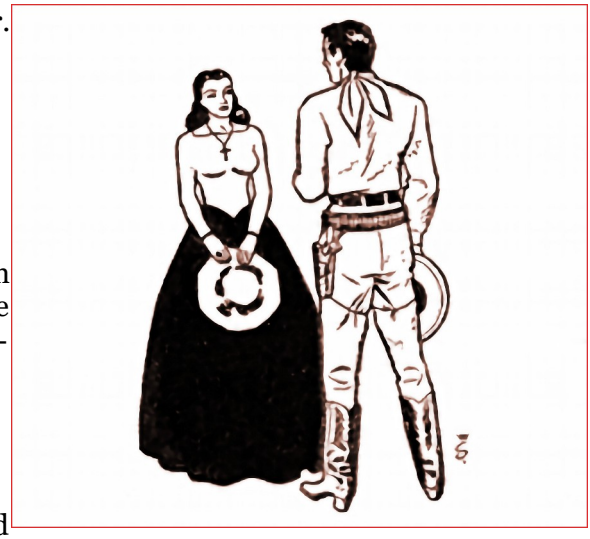
"Where's that hidin' place?" barked Bryant. "Where is it? Answer me, yuh louse!"

"Answer you an' then go an' get hanged? What d'ya take me for, Bryant, a fool? Not on your life! You've got to make your mind up quick!"

Hoofs clattered outside the house. Wallie glanced through the window and saw a score of horsemen coming close with Yuma in the lead. "Quick," he cried. "It's us or Penelope! You can put all the blame on the dead men! If me an' Vince an' Lombard can ride out of here, we'll promise that Penelope comes home before dark! Turn us over to the law an' I swear you'll never see that girl again!" Bryant raged and stormed. His fury broke all past attainments. The louder the old man shouted, the more he said, the more poised Wallie became. During the furor the Lone Ranger made no comment. The hoofs clattered in halting, and men's voices carried to the room. The Lone Ranger saw with satisfaction that the men with Yuma were not weak-willed deputies like Slim. They were grim man-hunters—Texas Rangers—and they lost no time in herding the men of the Basin into a close-packed group with hands upraised. A door was opened downstairs, and heavy boots clattered on the stairs. Bryant Cavendish, sweat dripping from his face, looked beaten. He cast an appealing glance toward the masked man.

"I," he said, "don't have no choice. You gotta stand behind me. That girl's life means more 'n these crooks' death! That skunk has played an ace."

CHAPTER XXIX - AN ACE IS TRUMPED



The Lone Ranger closed the door. Wallie looked at him and smirked. "Now yer showin' good judgment," he said. "I've got a story all fixed up. It'll put us in the clear an'—"

A shout outside the door. "Come in alone, Yuma," the masked man replied, stepping back against the wall. There was a hurried conversation in the hall, then Yuma came in. His face was red and sweaty. His eyes went wide with surprise at the scene before him.

"Close the door," said the masked man softly. Yuma slapped it closed and then exclaimed, "What's been been goin' on?" He saw Bryant, then the others with their hands still held slightly lifted. "Yuma," the masked man said, "Jeb is about the house some place. You might have a couple of the men look beneath the living-room floor."

"But what's been goin' on here?" repeated the big cowboy. "Has that old buzzard confessed?"

"Bryant is in the clear. Get the story briefly. Wallie led the gang. Bryant's half-blind, but I know of a doctor who can help him. Bryant didn't know what went on here. Penelope is supposed to inherit everything, but I have an idea that she and Bryant will be together for a good many years before there's any inheritance to talk about." Yuma nodded, still wide-eyed. He looked from Bryant to Wallie, then at the men on the floor. He said, "There'll be a nice hunk o' reward money comin' fer the capture o' these critters."

"I won't be here to collect any reward, Yuma. You helped capture them. Perhaps you and Bryant can split the rewards."

Yuma looked surprised. "Yuh mean tuh say yuh don't want the reward money?" The masked man shook his head. Then Yuma saw his drawn face and the blood-soaked shirt. "Look here, yore hurt bad. Yuh need some patchin' up." He stepped to the door. "I'll call the Rangers in here tuh take things in hand an' see about you."

"No, no," the Lone Ranger said quickly. "Tonto will be here and he'll fix the wound. It doesn't amount to much."

"There's something more important. Wallie was just trying to buy his freedom. He had Penelope taken to Breed Martin in Red Oak."

"Breed Martin!" howled Yuma, following the name with a string of invectives. "Why that—"

"Wallie said that Breed was to take the girl to a hiding place and if he didn't hear from Wallie to go on to Mexico with her." Yuma's face lost color. His eyes flashed angry fire in a look toward the erstwhile bandit leader. "An' so he wants tuh be let go free," said Yuma with terrible coldness in his voice. "Where is this hidin' place?"

Wallie spoke. "D'you think I'm fool enough to tell you? Not me. You let me go an' you'll see Penny back here soon."

"I think," said Yuma slowly, "yore agoin' tuh tell where at that place is." He took one step forward, swinging his right hand in a wide arc. It landed open-palmed with a resounding slap on Wallie's cheek. "That," cried Yuma, "ain't even the start!" He brought his left around to slap the other side of Wallie's face, and then began a dazzling sequence of open-handed slaps, each one delivered with a force that bounced Wallie's head from one side to the other. A blow with a closed fist would have knocked the killer out, and Yuma didn't want this. He slapped until the other's face became a livid mass of swollen flesh. He would have gone on until exhaustion made him stop, but the Lone Ranger halted him.

"That's enough, Yuma—enough," the masked man called above cries that came from Bryant. Yuma, breathing hard, stepped back. "That's just the start, yuh ornery rat," he gasped. "Now you speak up or I'll wade in with more o' the same!" Wallie was reeling, clutching at a table for support. His eyes were red, and blood drooled from a corner of his mouth.

"I didn't intend to let you go that far," the masked man said. "There is no need of trying to make him reveal this hiding place." "No need?" demanded Yuma.

"No. Tonto didn't take Penelope to Martin's. He went to Red Oak and then followed you and the Texas Rangers back here."

"I ain't seen him or that girl," argued Wallie.

"Look out the window." The buckboard with its team still hitched was near the corral. The children were still on board. "Where at," cried Yuma, "is my girl?" "She and Tonto came into the house." Wallie had slumped to the floor and sat there completely beaten and wearing a dazed, bewildered expression.

"Now listen to me carefully," the masked man told Yuma. "If the Texas Rangers see me here, with this mask on, they'll ask no end of questions. I don't want that. I want to slip out of this house by the rear stairs. You can turn these men over to the law, and Bryant will tell the entire story."

There was a hammering upon the bedroom door. "The Rangers," said the masked man softly. "Tell them to go back downstairs."

Yuma shouted through the door, "Vamoose, I'll be down tuh meet yuh in a minute!"

"Don't you tell me to vamoose in my own house," a girl's voice retorted.

"Penny!" breathed the big cowboy.

"See if she is at the door alone," the masked man said while he still held the latch of the door.

Penny's voice gave the answer. "Open up, you big galoot. Tonto is here with me! I've got to see that masked man in a hurry!"

The Lone Ranger told Yuma to stay in the room and bind the hands of the three prisoners. Then he stepped out to the hall.

Tonto said, "Me watch for Ranger. Girl want talk with you." The Indian took a place at the head of the stairs to give a sign in case the Texans came up the stairs.

Penelope clutched the masked man's arm. "Please," she said with intensity in her eyes and voice, "don't let them take Uncle Bryant away. I'm sure there must be some reason for—for everything. He's been like a father to me, he's been honest and good all his life. If he's changed it must be for some reason. You promised me—"

Penny held a silver bullet toward the Lone Ranger. "You gave me your word!"

The Lone Ranger took the girl's small hand in his and closed her fingers about the bit of precious metal. "Keep that," he said. "Your Uncle Bryant isn't going to jail. He's going to a doctor and have his eyes fixed up."

"Then—then I was right in the first place!" Penelope's face lighted up with the announcement.

"The worst crime of your uncle was his refusal to let friends help him."

A new note came into the confusion of voices on the first floor. Tonto explained that Jeb had been found and was telling everything he knew about the others. The masked man listened for a moment to the heavy voice that told how Wallie planned to place the murder guilt on the masked man and Bryant.

Then the bedroom door jerked open. Yuma came out like a charging bull and halted abruptly at the sight of Penny. Bryant, leaning against the edge of the door, stood right behind him. "Yuh can't leave here yet," Yuma told the Lone Ranger. "I got them critters roped so's they won't make no more trouble; now yuh got tuh wait an' listen tuh what Bryant's got tuh say."

Yuma looked at Penny; then his old confusion overcame him. He fumbled with the buttons of his shirt and barely raised his eyes above the floor.

Bryant Cavendish went to the point at once. "You," he said to the Lone Ranger, "have gotta stay here an' run this ranch."

The masked man shook his head slowly.

"I won't take 'no' fer an answer. I've got tuh go an' take a trip tuh git my eyes fixed up an' I cain't leave this place with no one tuh run it an' no cowhands tuh run it with. We've gotta git all new men an' weed out the cattle that's been stolen, an' see that the folks that lost their cattle are paid back in full fer it an' no end of other things. Now you stay here an' name yer own price."

"I can't do it, Bryant. Tonto and I must leave here."

Penelope clutched the masked man. "Please," she said. "Please stay." She looked into his eyes in a way that made big Yuma squirm.

"Doggone," he said softly and wistfully, "if she ever said that tuh me a span o' wild hosses couldn't drag me off this ranch."

Penny turned quickly. "*You*!" she said. "If you're to stay here, you've got to stop that cussing."

"Huh? M-me stay? I been fired!" Yuma looked at Bryant. "Y-yore uncle told me tuh git lost"

"More swearing," snapped Penelope.

Bryant broke in. "You look here, you big sidewinder, you was tryin' tuh tell me how this outfit should be run. Yuh did a heap of braggin' an' boastin' on how much yuh knowed an' now yore goin' tuh make good. I'd like tuh have that masked man stay an' do the bossin', but I'd have to have you as well. If he won't stay, then it's you that'll have to do the bossin'. I can't stop the masked man from leavin', but, if *you* run out on me, I'll make yuh wish yuh hadn't."

"Yuh-yuh mean that I ain't fired then?" Yuma blinked at Bryant, then looked at Penny and his face fell. "A-w-w h, Cavendish, I cain't stay around here.

That doggone purty girl jest ain't no use fer me, an' every time I speak tuh her I rile her more. I reckon I—"

"Yuma!" said Penny sharply. "It's bad enough for you to swear like a—like a mule skinner. Are you going to fib as well?"

"M-me fib?"

"Blaming *me* because you won't stay here! Trying to say that it is my fault, and that I have no use for you!"

"I—I—er uh ... that is...."

"That's an out 'n' out *fib*!" Yuma's jaw dropped and he stared. Comprehension came to him slowly. It was incredible, unthinkable! "Y-you—you *want* me tuh stay?" he faltered. Penelope looked at him and spoke softly. "Please." She took one of his big hands in both of hers. "At least stay for a little while so I can tell you what I mean."

Yuma let out a wild yell that rang throughout the house. "I'm astayin'," he roared. "She wants me tuh stay. I'm drunk—I'm adreamin', an' I'll drill the critter that wakes me up."

"Blast yuh," bellowed Bryant. "If yer goin' loco, git those men downstairs first; then I don't care what yuh do! Clear out my room an' after that yer runnin' this place on yer own!"

"I'm adoin' it!" cried Yuma, dashing through the door. In an instant he was back with Wallie under one arm, Vince beneath the other, both kicking their legs and crying at their undignified position. At the stairs, big Yuma met the Rangers coming up. "Hyar yuh are, boys," he called heartily. "Thar's a couple o' yore prisoners an' the rest are comin' pronto." He let go his grip, and the captive pair dropped to the stairs and rolled down part way, where the Texas Rangers caught them. It was then that Penny realized it: the Lone Ranger and Tonto were not there. Sometime during the conversation with big Yuma, the two had slipped away. They hadn't gone down the front stairs; the Texas Rangers had been in that part of the house. Penny hurried down the hall to her own bedroom and looked out the window. It faced the same as Bryant's window did. There were two horses at the corner of the house: Tonto's paint horse and the big white stallion. She saw the masked man in the saddle, Tonto about to mount. The girl watched as the two rode out across the Basin toward the distant Gap. She felt that something vital left her as that masked man rode away, and yet she wouldn't have called him back. "Good-by," she breathed, "good-by, my friend." The Gap yawned in the distance, a colorful opening under a westering sun. Penelope's eyes were bright as she finally saw the two horsemen disappear beyond the bend.

CHAPTER XXX - THE BADGE OF A RANGER

Riding through the gap at Tonto's side, the Lone Ranger seemed lost in his thoughts. His mood was one of introspection. He had no desire for money; he never in the least desired to own land and large droves of livestock and make deals with other men. His silver mine would still remain unworked. Why, he wondered, should men want to make a trade that was to any other person's disadvantage? True, self-preservation was the first law of life, but wild things of the forest interpreted that law of nature without greed or dishonesty. They lived by the rule of what was best for the greatest number.

On the other hand, because men preyed on one another, should he turn his back upon a so-called civilization? The answer came to him then, clear and unmistakable. Since he had been a boy, the strong masked man had gone to nature for his education. Now, as a man unnamed, he would try to make mankind benefit by what he had learned.

Tonto studied the masked man with grave concern. He had tried to persuade his friend to halt and let his wounds be dressed, but the Lone Ranger had refused. "We'll go on," he said. "There's one more thing I want to do."

A period of riding in silence brought them deep inside the Gap. Tonto asked no questions, made no comments. He simply rode in stolid patience, wondering if the Lone Ranger could know what he so desperately hoped for the future. The pledge the masked man had made had been fulfilled. Now the Lone Ranger could unmask, reclaim his name, and take his place once more with white men. Would that be his decision? Tonto wondered.

The Texan reined up, then dismounted. He still breathed with difficulty, and his face was white and drawn. Hard lines showed at each side of his mouth as he stepped close to one wall of the canyon. Tonto recognized the place. Six mounds of earth and stone were there, surmounted by six rough crosses.

The Lone Ranger stood before the first of these and removed his hat and then his mask. The soft, warm light of the sunset brought a glow into the Texan's upraised face and wiped away the lines of pain and fatigue. His lips moved slowly, though the Texan's voice was silent. Then he dropped his eyes and whispered, "Bert." He moved to the next grave and paused there, whispering, "For you too, Jim." At the third small cross the Texan whispered, "Dave," and at the next he called to, "Grant," then "Don."

At the sixth grave, the tall white man crouched and scooped aside the dirt and shale. He reached into the pocket of his shirt and withdrew a star of metal. He looked at it for just a moment. The badge of the Ranger caught the sun's light and sent it sparkling into Tonto's eyes. Then the Texan dropped the badge into the hollow he had made, and covered it.

Now he rose and faced the Indian. He nodded ever so slightly as if he understood what Tonto hoped for and desired. A faint smile broke the corners of his mouth as he replaced the mask across his eyes.

"A little rest," he said, "to give my wounds a chance to heal, and then we'll ride again!"

Tonto said, "Me know good camp. We go there? Tonto fix wound?"

The masked man put on his hat and jerked it low. He placed one foot in the stirrup. "We," he said, "will go there now!" He swung his leg across the saddle, and his voice rang out with a crystal clearness that carried through Bryant's Gap, echoing and re-echoing from wall to wall. "Hi-Yo Silver, Away-y-y!"

Silver leaped ahead, his master in the saddle. Tonto rode behind and grinned in happiness, following the tall masked man whom he called "friend."

*** END - MASK OF THE LONE RANGER ***

About the Author

Larry W Jones is a songwriter, having penned over 7,700 song lyrics. Published in 22 volumes of island themed, country, cowboy, western and bluegrass songs. The entire assemblage is the world's largest collection of lyrics written by an individual songwriter.

As a wrangler on the "Great American Horse Drive", at age 68, he assisted in driving 800 half-wild horses 62 miles in two days, from Winter pasture grounds in far NW Colorado to the Big Gulch Ranch outside of Craig Colorado.

His book, "The Oldest Greenhorn", chronicles the adventures and perils in earning the "Gate-to-Gate" trophy belt buckle the hard way.

Other books published by Larry W Jones:

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